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Illusions of freedom: Practice and contradictions in the work of construction site managers

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, scholars have paid increasing attention to the work of site managers in the construction industry. Their work has been portrayed in rather contradictory terms as, on the one hand, one of the most powerful and influential roles in the industry, and on the other, one of the most pressured and constrained roles. The pressures have often been said to be derived from macro-level characteristics of the industry itself, including its structure, culture and technical/administrative conditions, which are suggested to predicate a particularly demanding work situation characterized by a heavy workload, long working hours and a reactive coping pattern.

This thesis adopts a critical stance to the assumption that the everyday work practices of site managers can be solely explained as causally derived from macro-level characteristics of the construction industry. Instead, a need to take into account the situated lived realities of these managers is called for. The overall purpose of this thesis is to explore the everyday work of construction site managers, focusing in particular on how they experience and cope with their work. An exploratory and interpretative research approach combined with a practice lens is used. The thesis draws on rich empirical data (interviews, observations, workshops) from an in-depth case study of a large construction company (ConstructED), as well as interview data from several other large and mid-sized construction companies in Sweden.

The findings show that site managers tend to cope with their demanding work situation by overworking. However, while overwork often has been portrayed as an outcome of pressures derived from industry conditions, this thesis shows that it is a much more complex, multifaceted and meaningful behavior. It can be understood as a symbolic manifestation of how site managers reactively cope with work *and* proactively mobilizing this hard-working image of themselves to expand their autonomy. Moreover, it is shown that the managers' proclivity to expand their autonomy can trigger unintended dynamics through which they paradoxically entrap themselves in overwork. The findings highlight the contour of an unobtrusive control mechanism that might serve to discipline the site managers indirectly. The thesis goes beyond the image of site managers' work as merely a reactive coping response, and highlights a complex and paradoxical interplay between micro-level practices and macro-level conditions that has hitherto been under-researched. By exploring this interplay, the thesis contributes with novel insights into, not only the everyday work of site managers, but also the practical underpinnings of some of the prominent characteristics of the construction industry.

Keywords: autonomy, construction site managers, coupling work, embodied work, entrapment, managerial work, organizational control, overwork

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Göteborg, 5th of August, 2021
Rikard Sandberg

Appended papers

This thesis is based on the following appended papers.

Paper I

Sandberg, R., Räisänen, C., Löwstedt, M. and Raiden, A. (2018). Liberating the semantics: Embodied work(man)ship in construction. In Sage, D. and Vitry, C., eds. (2018) *Societies under construction: Geographies, Sociologies and Histories of Building.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 115-149

Paper II

Löwstedt, M. and Sandberg, R. (2020). Standardizing the free and independent professional: The case of construction site managers in Sweden. *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management, 27 (6), 1337-1355*

Paper III

Sandberg, R., Löwstedt, M. and Räisänen, C. (2021). Working in a loosely coupled system: Exploring practices and implications of coupling work on construction sites. *Construction Management and Economics, 39 (3), 212-226*

Paper IV

Sandberg, R. Autonomy paradox and entrapment in the construction industry: the case of overworked site managers. (Manuscript submitted to a scientific journal, undergoing revisions based on reviewers' comments).

Distribution of work

This section outlines the distribution of work for the appended research papers of the thesis.

Paper I:

Sandberg is the first author. This invited book chapter builds on an idea that the authors developed in a previous conference paper (Sandberg et al., 2016c). The data collection was performed by Sandberg and Räisänen. The writing was performed in joint collaboration; an early version was written by Sandberg; Räisänen was the main contributor in the final version; Sandberg contributed with ideas and sections of the text in the introduction and theoretical framing, and to a larger extent to the research design, data analysis and findings sections.

Paper II:

Löwstedt is the first author. The original idea was developed by Löwstedt and he is the main contributor. Sandberg contributed with data collection and analyses, ideas and feedback, and the main writing of the findings section.

Paper III:

Sandberg is the first author. The original idea was developed by Sandberg. The data collection was done by Sandberg. The writing was done jointly with Sandberg as main contributor. Löwstedt and Räisänen contributed with continuous feedback and fruitful discussions.

Paper IV:

Sandberg is the sole author of the paper; the data collection and writing was done by Sandberg.

Additional publications

Räisänen, C., Sandberg, R. and Raiden, A. (2015). Passion or delusion: Middle managers constructing new meanings of work. *In book of abstracts of the WORK2015 conference, 19-21 August, Turku, Finland.*

Sandberg, R., Räisänen, C. and Raiden, A. (2015). What's taking space on site? Embodied place making in construction. *APROS/EGOS conference paper, 9-11 December, Sydney, Australia.*

Sandberg, R., Raiden, A. and Räisänen, C. (2016a). Workaholics on site! Sustainability of site managers' work situations? *In proceedings of the 21st WBC16 Congress, 30 May-3 June, Tampere, Finland.*

Sandberg, R., Löwstedt, M., Räisänen, C. and Raiden, A. (2016b). The site manager as an omnious being: Exploring the 'body' in embodiment of organizational spaces. *32nd EGOS Colloquium paper, 4-6 July, Naples, Italy.*

Sandberg, R., Räisänen, C., Löwstedt, M. and Raiden, A. (2016c). Exploring the Work Practices of Site Managers as Processes of Embodiment. *In proceedings of the 32nd Annual ARCOM Conference, 5-7 September, Manchester, UK.* (Awarded best paper)

Sandberg, R. (2017). *The work of construction site managers: problematizing perceptions of embodied work practices*. Licentiate thesis. Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering. Chalmers.

Sandberg, R., Löwstedt, M. and Räisänen, C. (2018). The indispensable site manager: Normalization of overwork in the construction industry. *34th EGOS Colloquium paper, 6-7 July, Tallinn, Estonia.*

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis addresses the everyday work of managers. Ever since Sune Carlson's seminal study on the work of managing directors in 1959, a growing body of literature has paid attention to the work of managers in organizational workplaces (see for example Stewart, 1988; Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982; Jackall, 1988; Watson, 1994 for important contributions). Over the last two decades in the Swedish context, there has been a growing interest in examining the daily work and work-related situations of managers (e.g., Tengblad, 2012; Arman et al., 2009; Tengelin et al., 2011; Styhre, 2012; Björk, 2014; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). In this literature, 'managerial work' has been used as an analytical construct to examine management as work practice performed by managers in everyday work, although there are different scholarly understandings of the term (see Korica et al., 2017 for a recent review). The construct directs attention to the work practices, activities and actions performed by managers on a day-to-day basis; what they actually do at work, and how they do it. Thus, the focus is on 'how widespread certain management practices are [or not], how they are performed in everyday work, and what the outcomes are' (Tengblad, 2012, p. 5). This view departs from more rationalistic/deterministic models, in which management is seen as constituted by a composite set of functions – planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling – to describe behavior, in the spirit of Henri Fayol and others in the 'classical school' of management theory (Mintzberg, 1973).

The thesis examines the work of a particular category of managers in a particular professional context, namely site managers in the construction industry. Construction site managers are an interesting managerial species to study for a number of reasons: formally speaking, they are generally categorized as middle managers, yet their role has been described in somewhat contradictory terms that both resemble and deviate from 'typical' images of middle managers. From one perspective, site managers have been said to have one of the most powerful and influential positions in the construction industry (e.g., Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Gann and Salter, 2003), as compared to the bleak view of middle managers as increasingly 'sandwiched' and marginalized in modern organizations (e.g., Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Parris et al., 2008; Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Construction site managers are the operative leaders in charge of the construction firm's most important value-adding activities in the building process: the building of the industry's artefacts. Their leadership performance has been shown to have a large impact on the success or failure of construction projects (Mustapha and Naoum, 1998; Ogunlana, 2009). Their role has been described as an important 'hub' and gatekeeper in construction projects with potential possibilities of enabling or impeding change initiatives in the industry (e.g., Koch et al., 2015). Their power is manifest in how they have been referred to as 'kings', 'barons' and 'CEOs' of the projects (e.g., Sauer et al., 2001; Gann et al., 2012).

Yet, from another perspective, site managers have often been said to have one of the most pressured, demanding and constrained roles in the construction industry. Their work is characterized by a heavy workload, excessively long working hours, long period of work away

from home, and divergent expectations and demands from a wide number of project stakeholders (Djebarni, 1996; Bowen et al., 2014) which makes them 'more or less tied to the construction site' (Styhre, 2012, p. 136). They have been described as more likely to be exposed to stress than are other managerial categories, both in construction and other industries (Davidson and Sutherland, 1992; see also Leung et al., 2008). Studies have also shown that job pressures and responsibilities demanded of site managers have been increasing and diversifying, thus exposing them as a risk group for job-related ill health, such as burnout, stress, fatigue, workaholism, work-family conflict, and alcohol and drug misuse (Lingard and Francis, 2004; Lingard et al., 2007; Styhre, 2011, 2012; Yang et al., 2017; Bowen et al., 2018; Sherratt et al., 2017). This line of research depicts a rather flattened image of site managers; their work is hectic and demanding, they are stressed, their work is becoming increasingly bureaucratized in line with NPM (New Public Management) thinking and demands for standardization which are curtailing their autonomy; as Styhre (2012) notes, they are 'muddling through', just *barely* coping in an unpredictable environment.

It can be debated whether these two contrasting images of the site-manager role are in fact contradictory. Could they just not be two different aspects of one and the same work role, that are maybe compatible? I guess it depends on how you see it. Of course, a work role can be both enriching and rewarding, as well as draining and stressful at the same time without necessarily entailing a contradiction. It might depend on which aspects of the role you focus on. However, there seem to be aspects of the two images that are tension-ridden, perhaps even in fact contradictory. One aspect is the tension between power and powerlessness that emerge in the comparison of the images. Another related aspect is the tension between autonomy and constraint. Is it possible to be a free and powerful 'project baron' while simultaneously being stuck to a desk dealing with onerous paperwork and seeing one's autonomous work being standardized? Perhaps! But one way of seeing it is that it is a contradiction.

Previous studies that have examined the work of site managers have tended to draw on macro-level characteristics of the construction industry when explaining their work realities and conditions. This includes, for example, the loosely coupled industry structure and its decentralized and dispersed mode of working (e.g., Styhre, 2012; Bresnen et al., 2005; Mäki and Kerosuo, 2015), the masculine industry culture and norm of long working hours (e.g., Watts, 2009; Styhre, 2011; Ness, 2012; Turner et al., 2009) and developments towards increasing standardization and bureaucratization of construction projects (e.g., Styhre, 2006; Christiansen, 2012; Polesie, 2013). These conditions combined with the complexity of construction projects have been said to put considerable pressure on site managers. Many studies have therefore focused on how site managers cope with their demanding work situation (Davidson and Sutherland, 1992; Djebarni, 1996; Haynes and Love, 2004; Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Bowen et al., 2021). For example, Styhre (2012) suggested that these industry-specific characteristics give rise to a reactive work response of 'muddling through', describing how site managers improvise and skillfully deal with unpredictable events on an ad hoc basis as these arise. According to Styhre, muddling through is a practice that is *required* by construction site managers in order to cope with the complexities of their work, and the pressures derived from working in a loosely coupled industry system (p. 139)

At the heart of this reasoning is the assumption that everyday work practices can be causally derived from macro-level (structural, cultural, technical/administrative) characteristics

of the industry. Furthermore, this can be seen to reflect a more general trend in construction management research (CMR) of giving macro-level characteristics (i.e., on industry-level) interpretative precedence when explaining how work at the micro-level (i.e., on project and site levels) are shaped and can be understood (Dainty et al., 2007; Chan and Räisänen, 2009).

However, this view has been critiqued for failing to take into account the situated lived realities of those working in the industry (e.g., Sage and Vitry, 2018; Rooke and Seymour, 1995; Cicmil et al., 2006). Consequently, we still know little about how these macro-level conditions actually connect with the daily work realities of site managers, or vice-versa. For example, how do the conditions influence the daily work practices, activities and responses to 'new' demands, of site managers, and how do the managers experience and navigate the pressures derived from these conditions? Considering the increasing attention that previous research has paid to coping among site managers, there has been surprisingly few studies that have examined the unfolding of site managers coping strategies in their everyday work. Most studies have relied on quantitative methods with the exceptions of a few interview-based studies.

Previous research in project management and construction management has highlighted a need to examine the micro-level 'lived experiences' of working and managing in construction projects in order to enhance understanding of various macro-level characteristics in the construction industry (Cicmil et al., 2006; Dainty et al., 2007; Geraldi and Söderlund, 2018). Other studies have shown how in-depth investigations into how managers cope with stressful project work situations can provide a fruitful lens in linking individual-level concerns to wider macro-level phenomena in contemporary organizations (Delisle, 2020; Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). More broadly, management scholars have also called for an urgent need to examine the situated realities of managerial work by using a practice-based approach, including how managers cope with pressures, complexities, ambiguities and overload in organizational workplaces (e.g., Tengblad, 2012). In spite of a fair amount of research concerning activities on construction sites, to date, there is still scant in-depth knowledge and insight of the situated work practices and activities of construction site managers.

This thesis takes a critical stance to the assumption that the everyday work practices of site managers can be solely explained as causally derived from macro-level characteristics of the construction industry. I see at least two reasons for questioning this assumption. First, it is problematic to claim that micro-level work practices are shaped by macro-level conditions when there is in fact a lack of knowledge of what characterizes these practices. Construction has been described as an inherently 'site-specific project-based activity' (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). If this is true, is it not likely that some of the macro-level conditions have been shaped by practices that have emerged on construction sites rather than only the other way around? Second, even if the work practices have been shaped by macro-level conditions, this says very little about the iterative production of the conditions themselves. For example, do the actions of site managers facilitate or interfere with (re)production of the conditions? Are the macro-characteristics the sole conditioning of managerial work practices, or are there other explanations? These questions highlight a need to shift focus to the micro-level and explore 'open-endedly the what, how and, crucially, the why of managerial work' in the construction site realm (Korica et al. 2017, p. 164).

There is thus a need to foreground *work* as a central unit of inquiry in order to gain a better understanding of the situated lived realities of site managers and how these relate in practice to wider conditions and developments in the construction industry (cf. Barley and Kunda, 2001). In part, this entails examining what they actually do at work, how they cope with work and how they respond to external demands. But it also entails seriously taking into account their lived experiences and the meaning that goes into their work. For example, if we are to consider the Janus-faced description of site manager-work outlined in previous research – being on the one side powerful and influential, and on the other side constrained and powerless – what does this actually mean for the site managers? This is a question that calls for a consideration of how they make sense of, reflect over and rationalize their work. It also underlines a need to consider how they navigate and cope with the contradictions of their work. This of course builds on the assumption that they actually perceive the different aspects of their work as contradictory, rather than complementary, or any other meanings that they attach to it.

Against this background, this thesis sets out to examine the situated work-life realities of site managers against the backdrop of the construction industry. These managers' daily work is explored using a practice-based approach inspired by the work of Tengblad (2012) and Alvesson and Sveningsson's notion of the 'mundane', where the managers work-life experiences, meaning-making and coping responses are central to the inquiry. Inquiries, into these lived realities, in turn, serve as a steppingstone toward examining some of the macro-level conditions (structural, cultural, technical/administrative) that characterize the construction industry. In other words, I turn the perspective around to see what an in-depth exploration of site managers' everyday work can reveal about the existence, reproduction and/or (possibly) transformation of some of the prominent characteristics of the industry, such as its loosely coupled structure, masculine culture and increasingly standardized and bureaucratized production processes.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The overriding aim of this thesis is to explore the everyday work of construction site managers in order to critically examine the idea that managerial work practices are causally derived from macro-level characteristics of the construction industry. By scrutinizing the data in previous studies and the data of a pilot/desk study (see study I), I came to realize that the relationship between industry conditions and site realities was intricate and complex. These data seemed to indicate a more bi-directional interplay between the industry characteristics and the work practices than previously has been recognized. This realization warranted a need to go in-depth and examine the lived experiences and the actual work of site managers in practice. To fulfill this overall aim, an explorative and interpretative approach was adopted, using a combination of qualitative research methods, such as life-story interviews, field observations and follow-up workshops. The interviews and the observations provide the empirical backbone of the study while the workshops functioned more as feedback tool for the analysis of collected data from the participants in the study. This multi-mode approach allows for an in-depth probing into the day-to-day practices and coping strategies of managing construction sites.

RQ 1: How do site managers' workdays unfold, and how do they experience and reflect on their work situations?

The first research question enables an open-ended exploration of the site managers' everyday work. The intended contribution is to gain in-depth knowledge of what characterizes their work, as well as their lived experiences and meaning making of work. Answering this question enables me to fulfil the first part of the aim.

RQ 2: How do site managers navigate and respond to industry/organizational demands and site realities, and what are the implications on industrial versus individual level?

The second research question complements the knowledge gained from the first question. The intended contribution is to gain knowledge of how site managers cope with their work, and what their coping responses can reveal about the macro-level conditions that characterize the construction industry. Answering this question enables me to fulfil the second part of the aim.

1.2 Limitations and definitions

A limitation of the study is that I focus the exploration on the three mentioned macro-level characteristics: the loosely coupled industry structure, the masculine industry culture, and developments towards increasing standardization and bureaucratization. There are of course many other characteristics on various levels (e.g., societal, industrial, organizational, individual) that influence the work of site managers in various ways. But I have chosen these three specific characteristics since they are frequently emphasized in the construction management (CM) literature. These characteristics are addressed in the appended papers, respectively: masculinity (paper I), standardization (paper II) and loose coupling (paper III). I have chosen to label these as 'characteristics' rather than 'structures'. An important reason for this is that I want to make a separation between the sociological concept of structure, which describes patterned social arrangements in society, and the overall structural arrangement of the construction industry. In addition, I refer to standardization as a 'development' to make the distinction vis-à-vis the other characteristics, which arguably are often portrayed as ingrained features of the industry.

Some words are also called for regarding what I mean by 'macro' and 'micro', and on what levels the characteristics and development exist. In sociology, the term macro is often used to describe social arrangements on societal level, such as class and socio-economic structures. When I use the term macro, I primarily refer to the level of the construction industry and its structural, cultural, and technical/administrative characteristics. Again, this is because the industry level remains central in explaining practices on the construction site level. When I use the term micro, I primarily refer to the site level in construction projects, and the people working there. This view resonates with how previous studies in construction and project management have conceptualized the micro-foundation of the construction industry (e.g., Geraldi and

Söderlund, 2018; Dainty et al., 2007). Standardization and bureaucratization are widespread phenomena on a societal level. However, in this thesis I refer to these more as contextualized phenomena at industry level. Construction has been described as an industry that differs from other industries, such as manufacturing, in the sense that it historically has resisted bureaucratization (Stinchcombe, 1959; Styhre, 2006). It is, therefore, relevant to look at bureaucratization and standardization as context-dependent, and potentially contested phenomena on industry level, rather than addressing them merely as generic developments on societal level.

1.3 Structure and layout of the thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters. This chapter has provided an introduction, the rationale and aim for the study. It has presented the problem at hand and the importance of exploring the lived realities of site managers. Chapter two provides the theoretical framing of the study. The first sub-section gives a brief overview of the particularities of the construction industry and reviews relevant previous research on the work and role of site managers. The second sub-section outlines the contours of a practice-based approach and the practice perspective adopted in the thesis. Chapter three details the methodological approach, the methods used and the nature and analysis of the data. Furthermore, the case organization is presented, as well as the three separate empirical sub-studies that the thesis draws on. In the fourth chapter, the appended papers are summarized. The purpose and design of the papers are presented followed by a brief overview of the main findings and contributions. In chapter five, the key findings from the appended papers are presented and discussed holistically, i.e., I discuss the combined findings from the papers as these relate to each other. Important patterns and phenomena are highlighted. Chapter six concludes, highlighting implication for theory and practice and main contributions as well as suggestions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMING

This chapter provides the theoretical framing of the thesis. The first part of the framing starts with an overview of the context of the study, namely the construction industry. Certain conditions and characteristics of the industry are presented which are especially relevant for the understanding of the work of site managers, including loose coupling, masculine norms and ideals and developments towards increasing standardization and bureaucratization. I pay particular attention to the loose-coupling notion since it is a condition that has been said to give rise to a particular work practice among site managers, namely 'muddling through'. The second part of the framing presents the practice-based approach to study managerial work and leadership that is used.

2.1 The construction industry and the work of site managers

The construction industry has been described as the 'epitome of a project-based industry' (Dainty et al., 2007), where the firm's most important value-adding activities are located at the site level in the individual construction projects (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Construction projects are heterogenous compositions, gathering a wide number of stakeholders coming from different spheres, professions and organizations, such as contractors, subcontractors, clients, architects, materials suppliers, professional craftsmen/women, municipal and governmental politicians, activists, and not least users. The relationship between these parties has been described as loose and informal (ibid.), which describes the temporary coalition of firms and individuals, who come together in different project phases, for limited periods of time to complete a project, and then are disbanded (Blayse and Manley, 2004). Different professional and occupational groups involved in the projects have different cultures, traditions and expertise, and not seldom different interests and political agendas which stand in conflict to each other (e.g., Clegg, 1978; Applebaum, 1999). All these parties engage in the projects, individually or in teams, at different stages, and in predetermined and often overlapping sequences (Gidado, 1996). This diversity makes for a complex and fragmented reality where the parties, besides working as separate entities, also need to coordinate their activities, and negotiate boundary interfaces both intra and inter-organizationally (Fellows and Liu, 2012; Dossick and Neff, 2010; Dainty et al., 2007). Construction can therefore be seen as an industry characterized by 'interdependence and uncertainty' (Crichton, 1966) that calls for 'a great need for coordination' in the building project organizations (Kadefors, 1995).

2.1.1 The construction industry as a loosely coupled system

Against this background, the construction industry has been described as a loosely coupled system (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). According to Weick (1976), a loosely coupled system is characterized by organizational elements (e.g., individuals, organizational subunits, activities, ideas) that are largely distinct and separate from one another, yet still need to be coordinated

and aligned. This simultaneous responsiveness and distinctiveness are captured in the word 'coupling'. Distinction is made between 'loose' and 'tight' coupling. As pointed out by Dorée and Holmen (2004, p. 828): 'the tighter the couplings are, the more they are interrelated, the greater is the need to coordinate, and the greater are the impacts of disturbances within one entity on another'. According to Dubois and Gadde (2002), the entire construction industry constitutes a loosely coupled system. This differs from many other studies that usually have used the coupling metaphor to describe *organizations* as loosely coupled systems (see Orton and Weick, 1990 for a review). Dubois and Gadde propose a stratified model of the construction industry that builds on two interdependent 'layers' (p. 621): a loose layer on the level of the permanent network of the industry where there are loose couplings between actors (firms), and a tight layer in construction projects, where there are strong interdependencies between activities undertaken in the building process.

This particular configuration can be seen as a response among construction firms to cope with the intricacies of construction projects (p. 622). Due to certain features related to the complexity embedded in the construction process, it has been argued that the industry is unsuitable for centralized forms of (bureaucratic) authority and decision-making (Stinchcombe, 1959) – a standpoint that has been debated by Eccles (1981) and others. Such complexity features include, for example, the relative uniqueness of each project, immovability of the built product, unfamiliarity among management with local resources and environment, unpredictability of the local environment, lack of complete specifications and reliance on the need for local adjustments on site level (Gidado, 1996; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The activities that unfold on construction sites have been described as chaotic and complex (Cicmil and Marshal, 2005; Ness, 2010), constituting an ad hoc environment in which unanticipated situations continuously emerge and militate against formal planning and standardization (Styhre, 2012).

According to Dubois and Gadde (2002), the configuration of the construction industry as a loosely coupled system makes it possible to come to grips with certain aspects of the complexity in the building process. They propose that the loose couplings between actors in the permanent industry network 'provides the slack necessary to handle the tight couplings in the projects' (p. 627). Drawing on Weick (1976), Dubois and Gadde argue that the loose coupling in the industry is beneficial for several reasons. For example, they suggest that it makes room for self-determination for project participants to deal with the uncertainty and interdependencies in the projects in order to create tight couplings between building activities. Moreover, loose coupling enables localized adaptations in individual construction projects, where they can adjust to and modify a unique contingency in the site environment without affecting the whole system.

The loose coupling metaphor has been applied in different ways in the construction management literature (see paper III). For example, it has been used to denote how all the different actors engaging in construction projects are organizationally loosely coupled to each other (e.g., Styhre, 2012; Mäki and Kerosuo, 2015). It has also been used to describe how temporary project organizations are intra-organizationally loosely coupled (or *de*coupled) from the permanent (parent) organization (e.g., Lindkvist, 2004; Bresnen, 2006; Gluch and Räisänen, 2009). The real appeal of the metaphor, however, to date, seems to be how it describes the overall 'looseness' of relationships between actors on the industry-level, and how such

looseness fosters a short-term mentality in the industry, explained as hampering innovation, learning and change (e.g., Blayse and Manley, 2004; Bygballe and Ingemansson, 2014).

The conceptualization of the construction industry as a loosely coupled system remains to date one of the most influential theories in explaining behavior, relationships and processes in the industry. However, few studies have examined the 'tight' part of the coupling system located on site-level within the individual construction projects. There is still little in-depth knowledge about how tight couplings are produced and re-produced in practice on construction sites through the day-to-day activities of the people working within the loosely coupled system. This implies that scholars in construction have a rather shallow understanding of how the tight *layer* (if that is a correct description) of the coupling system is actually produced and reproduced in practice (cf. Dubois and Gadde, 2002). It also implies that knowledge is lacking of what it actually means to *work* within the tight-coupled part of this loose-coupled system. Statements such as 'loose coupling provides slack' and 'makes room for self-determination to cope with complexity' adds little understanding to what this actually entails in practice. For example, how is the slack used in the projects? Is it used exclusively (or even primarily) to cope with complexities and to create tight couplings in the projects? Or are there other uses that have been overlooked?

In this thesis, I draw on rich empirical data from site managers work lives in order to explore the micro-foundation of the coupling system, especially the tightly coupled part. In paper III, the concept of 'coupling work' is introduced to capture and theorize an interesting interlinkage between mundane everyday work of site managers and reproduction of both the loose and tight conditions of the coupling system in construction.

2.1.2 The role and work of construction site managers

Within this loosely coupled system in construction, site managers have been said to benefit from a highly free and autonomous role (Djebarni, 1996; Applebaum, 1999; Styhre, 2011), which has been described as 'decoupled' from the control and governance of the parent organizations (Polesie, 2013). For example, Styhre (2006) has portrayed the role of site managers as similar to a CEO of construction projects – a metaphor that highlights both the high degree of autonomy and responsibility tied to their role. This can be seen to correspond to Stinchcombe's (1959) argument that the construction industry is unsuitable for centralized forms of authority, which calls for a need for decentralization of planning, authority and decision-making to the construction project level (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

It has been argued that site managers *require* a high degree of autonomy and authority in order to navigate their complex realities on site (Djebarni, 1996: Polesie, 2013). Although all the actors involved in construction projects are organizationally loosely coupled to each other, their dispersed work activities need to be tightly coupled during the production phase (Styhre, 2012). A strict budget and time schedule combined with tendencies towards leaner work organizations and supply chains leave little room for deviation from the initial plan. Autonomy allows the site managers the freedom and flexibility needed to improvise and act quickly whenever unforeseen disturbances arise in the projects. However, there also seems to be a strong emotional dimension embedded in the site managers' autonomous work practice. They

want to be free and autonomous since this is seen as a key-feature why they enjoy their job – a principal source of commitment and job satisfaction (Polesie, 2013). It has also been shown that site managers often take considerable pride in their work, especially a feeling of 'ownership' of the built product that they are responsible for producing (Sergeeva and Green, 2019; Watts, 2007). This pride, and satisfaction, can be seen as enabled by the fact that these managers historically have been able to work independently from the control and influence of the parent organizations (e.g., Hayes, 2002; Thiel, 2007).

These sentiments and identifications can be understood against the background of the construction industry as characterized by a 'craft organization' and ideology that has resisted bureaucratization and Taylorization, and consequently, the deskilling of craft labor (Stinchcombe, 1959; Steiger and Form, 1991; Styhre, 2006; Ness, 2012). Research has shown that site managers tend to identify themselves more as craftsmen than as white-collar workers (Thiel, 2007, 2013). 'Real work' (Ness, 2012, p. 661) for these managers is not administrative deskwork, but to go out on site and 'get your hands dirty' and engaging in the nitty-gritty practices in the building process (see also Styhre, 2012, Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2014). This craftsman identity has also been argued to be inherently intertwined with masculine conceptions of work. As claimed by Ness (2012, p. 661): '[t]he identity of male construction workers is defined in relation to their masculinity and their masculinity is defined in relation to their tough job'. It has furthermore been argued that site managers uphold a certain masculine and paternalistic ideal in the industry, premiering an image of themselves as being independent, self-reliant, tough and willing to work long hours (Styhre, 2011; Arditi et al., 2013; Raiden, 2016). This ideal echoes typical descriptions of craftsmanship as portrayed in seminal literature on the topic. As pointed out by Kondo in her book *Crafting Selves* (1990), the crafts*man* is precisely a man. Craftsmanship is embodied through a 'certain kind of masculinity', where the worker endures hardships in silence and relies on his own skills to 'get things done' with the limited resources available and regardless of how burdensome the circumstances may be. In addition, Mills (1951, p. 220ff) emphasized the passion associated with craftsmanship, maintaining that '[t]he craftsman's work is the mainspring of the only life he knows; he does not flee from work into a separate sphere of leisure, he brings to his non-working hours the values and qualities developed and employed in his working time; the leisure […] called for is the leisure to think about work, that faithful old companion'. This, and similar descriptions of craftsmanship, portrays work and long working hours as a way of life, a norm.

Reinforcing the identification of the craftsman, is the highlighting of the central role of site managers for construction projects and, indeed, for the industry as a whole. They have been referred to as the 'hub around which everything revolves' (Styhre and Josehpson, 2006; see also Fryer, 1979; Fraser, 2000). There are good reasons for this description. In their role as operative managerial leaders, site managers are de facto the central actors on the construction site, the ones who ensure the crafting of the industries principal artefacts, who filter communication, coordinate and orchestrate at all the interfaces on the site and in the project. The site manager is also an important link and gatekeeper, mediating between the project and its environment, and liaising with all the stakeholders involved in the project (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). This work involves using different languages (or registers) and applying different types of knowledge adjusted to the cultures and worldviews of the different interacting

professions (see also Dossick and Neff, 2010; Mäki and Kerosuo, 2015). Gherardi and Nicolini (2002, p. 201-2) provided an apt portrayal of the generic work situation of a site manager:

> Of the managerial staff (engineer, architect, surveyor), he [the site manager] is the only one who wears heavy boots and has mud on his trousers. This accounts for his ability to enter areas of situated knowledge in which the ideal constructions of the designer enter into 'conversation' with the building – that is, are molded to the concrete reality of the work situation. At the same time, he must apply economic criteria and negotiate competently among the various needs voiced by the various actors on the building site (the firm with its concern for profit, the employees with their shortcomings, the customer and his representatives with their desire for everything immediately and at the lowest price possible).

This hub-like role seems to generate considerable authority over the building process. The site manager can be seen as the heroic leader who is 'bringing order to chaos' on construction sites (Ness, 2010). However, there also seems to be a darker side to this image. It has been suggested that site managers become substantially pressured in their attempts to balance the loose/tight coupling dependencies in the projects (Styhre, 2012). Due to their indispensable hub-role in construction projects, research suggests that site managers are subject to broad, varied and growing responsibilities (Styhre, 2006), many of which requiring skills and competencies they do not have nor have been trained for (Edum-Fotwe and McCaffer, 2000; Fraser, 2000). Besides being responsible for technical and production-oriented matters on site, such as planning and coordinating, the site manager is also held accountable for financial, legislative, administrative, procurement, working environment, human resource management and leadership aspects pertaining to the production phase of the projects.

This 'multiplicity of responsibilities' (Styhre, 2006) has been translated into a highly fragmented and demanding work environment that exposes site managers to considerable stress (e.g., Davidson and Sutherland, 1992). As outlined in the introduction of the thesis, the site managers' role has been described as one of the most demanding and stressful in the entire construction industry (Djebarni, 1996). They are generally known to work excessively long and irregular hours, not seldom above 60 hours per week (e.g., Styhre, 2011). In an influential study, Davidson and Sutherland (1992) highlighted 'time pressures' and 'working long hours' as the most important stressors in site managers' work. Additional studies have also highlighted insufficient time spent with family, onerous paperwork/bureaucracy and excessive workload as prevalent stressors (e.g., Djebarni, 1996; Ng et al., 2005; Bowen et al., 2014; Bowen et al., 2021). The long working hours and the pressures derived from their work has been shown to have detrimental consequences on the health, well-being and family lives of site managers, for example in terms of fatigue, burnout, presenteeism, work-life conflict and divorces (e.g., Lingard and Sublet, 2002; Lingard and Francis, 2004; Watts, 2009; Styhre, 2011; Yang et al., 2017). Over the past three decades, research has furthermore witnessed that the work situation of site managers has grown increasingly pressured and demanding: more areas of responsibility, stricter accountability and increased administrative duties seem to be prevalent trends (Edum-Fotwe and McCaffer, 2000; Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Mäki and Kerosuo, 2015).

In order to cope with the pressures and responsibilities of their work, Styhre (2012), drawing on Lindblom (1959), showed that site managers adopt a management work practice of 'muddling through'. Muddling through is described as an incremental, skillful and improvisational problem-solving approach, where the site managers, in addition to managing planned activities, also 'haphazardly cope with unpredictable events on an ad hoc basis' (Styhre, 2012, p. 134). According to Styhre, site managers adopt muddling through in order to stave off events and situations that threaten the continuity of production. In this regard, muddling through carries resemblance to Holmberg and Tyrstrup's (2010) notion of managerial leadership as an 'event-driven activity'. Although the specific work practices and activities may vary, the site managers are often driven by a common goal that production must continue regardless of the circumstances, strengthened by their personal commitment and pride toward the artefact being produced (Sergeeva and Green, 2019). In this sense, there seems to be an overlap between the practice of muddling through and the masculine craftsman ideal identified in previous studies (e.g., Styhre, 2011; Ness, 2012; Arditi et al., 2013; Raiden, 2016).

In construction research, the loosely coupled structure of the construction industry, its dominant masculine culture and developments towards standardization and bureaucratization are arguably the most influential factors in explaining site managers pressured and demanding work situation. Loose coupling and the masculine culture of the industry are also two of the most used theoretical lenses in explaining behaviors, attitudes and practices in construction more generally (see papers I and III). These structural and cultural characteristics are often treated as deeply ingrained features of the industry – something that the industry has, or even is. For example, research that addresses the loosely coupled structure of the construction industry has tended to portray this as a (more or less) 'fixed' attribute of the industry. Scholars rarely engage with how these structural features may be reproduced and how this reproduction is linked to everyday practices. I would therefore argue that the presumed structural features of the industry have come to be viewed as a 'black box'. As long as we lack knowledge of the possible interplay between structure and day-to-day practice, explanations of the influence of the structure remain 'invisible'.

In a similar vein, many studies of site managers highlight the pressures caused by an increased administrative workload, which is explained as an outcome of construction organizations' attempts to strengthen bureaucratization and control of construction projects by standardization of processes, practices and communication (Styhre, 2006; Christiansen, 2012; Polesie, 2013). Yet, these studies rarely seem to problematize the potential resistance that site managers may employ to counter such initiatives (paper II). If site managers have been conditioned to work in a remarkably free and independent role as 'project CEOs', is it likely that they would remain passive to organizational attempts aimed at diminishing their freedom through standardization and bureaucratization of their work? What happens to the identities of these managers as their freedom is threatened? What potential forms could resistance take? These questions remain unanswered and call for in-depth engagement with the site managers' daily work practices and their lived experiences of their work.

2.2. Managerial work and leadership: a practice-based approach

In this thesis, a practice lens is adopted to study site managers' daily work on construction sites. Inspired by the 'practice turn' in social sciences (see Schatzki et al., 2001), many researchers in management and organization studies have adopted a practice-based approach to study managerial work and leadership (e.g., Tengblad, 2012; Barker, 1997; Barley and Kunda, 2001). A practice-based approach has also been adopted in construction management research (see Kokkonen and Alin, 2015 for a review). A practice lens does not consist of a unitary set of theories, but can be seen to comprise a 'toolkit' of theoretical perspectives with different ontologies, traditions and vocabularies (Schatzki et al., 2001). Consequently, there are no widely agreed-upon definition of what practices are, and how they ought to be studied. At the most basic level, some practice theories seem to agree that practices can be seen as coordinated entities of 'sayings' and 'doings' that are held together by different elements that make practices collectively shared across time and space (Schatzki, 2002; Gherardi, 2009). However, there seems to be little agreement on what those 'elements' are that hold practices together, and how they guide practices, be they discourse, meaning, competence, procedures, rules or artefacts, among many other (see Nicolini, 2012). Concrete practices can include walking (Shove and Pantzar, 2005), photographing (Rose, 2016) and eating (Warde, 2016), for example.

The practice perspective adopted in this thesis foregrounds iterative work tasks, or sets of activities of site managers. It sees management as situated everyday work performed by the managers, which stands in contrast to rationalistic, predicated work models of management (Tengblad, 2012). What I mean by 'work practices' is what managers do in their everyday work, such as participating in meetings, solving unanticipated problems, making phone calls, deskwork, engaging in face-to-face conversations, walking around, and so forth. This perspective is prompted by Barley and Kunda's (2001) call to 'bring work back in' to the study of management and organization studies in order to provide a robust empirical base for the understanding and theorizing of organizational phenomena, such as the emergence of new technologies, organizational structures and ways of organizing. My perspective thus (partly) aligns with the research tradition on managerial work of Henry Mintzberg, which was prompted by his landmark study *The Nature of Managerial Work* (1973). As outlined in the introduction, this tradition has focused on the behavior of managers – that is, what managers do at work on a daily basis. An important focus in this tradition has been to record and categorize the behaviors of managers. Especially influential in this regard has been Mintzberg's (1970) structured observation method through which the researcher observes how a manager performs his/her work and categorizes each event in a number of ways (e.g., duration, participation, purpose) (p. 90). However, the approach that I have used deviates from the mintzbergian tradition in the sense that I put more emphasis on interpreting the symbolic meanings attached to mundane everyday activities, which is more in line of an ethnographic approach to managerial work (e.g., Jackall, 1988; Kunda, 1992; Watson, 1994), which I come back to later.

Although the research tradition in managerial work has been strongly influenced by the behavior-oriented (mintzbergian) research approach, this is also an approach that has been criticized by practice scholars such as Nicolini (2012) and Korica et al., (2017) for being a 'weak programme' of practice-based research. What they mean by this is that merely recording

and listing long catalogues of what managers do at work seems to rely on the assumption that practice is self-explanatory, which these scholars question. Although they commend the 'return-to-work' movement and share its interest in the importance of the mundane and routine aspects of work practice, they also argue that this movement has led to an overly descriptive and an 'a-theoretical' way of addressing practice, as well as reproducing pre-existing 'boxes' of managerial behavior rather than exploring more open-endedly the what and how, but also the why of managerial work (Korica et al. 2017, p. 164). For example, Nicolini (2012, p. 13) suggests:

> Reading through the painstaking, but often plain, descriptions of roles and tasks, one is left wondering 'so what'? The mere 'a-theoretical' cataloguing of what practitioners do may be an exciting endeavour for academics who are unfamiliar with the specific occupation, but it sheds little light on the meaning of the work that goes into it, what makes it possible, why it is the way it is, and how it contributes to, or interferes with the production of organizational life.

Other scholars also seem to agree that there has been too little theoretical development on the topic of managerial work (Hales, 1999; Bouty and Drucker-Godard, 2018), although this view is contested (e.g., Tengblad and Vie, 2012). Based on this critique, Nicolini (2012) and Korica et al. (2017), advocate a 'strong programme' of practice-based research that strives to *explain* organizational matters in terms of practices rather than simply registering them. This approach builds on the view that practices are more than 'just doing', as implied by the common-sensical definition of the term. Instead, they propose that practices can be understood as 'meaning-making, identity-forming and order-producing activities' (Nicolini, 2009). In other words, practices shape people's meanings and understandings of the world, as well as their understanding of who they are. According to this view, simply observing and categorizing activities of managers with the ambition to get closer to the true definitional essence of managerial work is a misleading notion. Instead, they argue that practice scholars do need to pay close attention to managerial activity, but only as a point of departure to understanding those practical conditions that shape the dynamics of everyday activity (Nicolini, 2012; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). In other words, a strong practice-based approach implies providing convincing accounts of both the activity *and* the conditions that make the activity possible (Korica et al., 2017, p. 165). It also implies taking into account the 'sayings' as well, i.e., not only observing what they do, but also listening to their stories about their daily doings and how they experience and make sense of these doings (Barley and Kunda, 2001, Czarniawska, 2014).

In this thesis, I take a 'middle ground' between these practice-based approaches while refraining from labeling these as 'weak' or 'strong'. I share the view of the importance stressed in the behavior-oriented (mintzbergian) research tradition of paying close attention to the details of work activities. I think that the claim that this research tradition is 'a-theoretical' is a bit exaggerated and unnuanced, especially since it disregards important theoretical contributions that have emerged within the tradition, for example in terms of contingency theory and emergent strategy/processual perspectives on management (see Tengblad and Vie, 2012). I believe that rich and detailed studies of what managers do can indeed provide a fruitful

approach to unravel the complex, multifaceted and ambiguous realities of organizational life, and to provide a solid empirical basis to advance organizational theory (Barley and Kunda, 2001; Tengblad, 2012). I also believe this approach is especially suitable to explore the work of site managers. This view is motivated by the reductionist tendency in previous research of explaining their everyday work practice in the light of macro-level characteristics of the construction industry when there is in fact a lack of knowledge of what actually characterizes their everyday work.

However, I also share some concerns raised by Nicolini (2012) and Korica et al., (2017). I do not really see that recording and categorizing each and every activity performed in everyday work would get me much closer to understanding what it *means* to be a site manager. For example, how would one capture the pride, satisfaction and masculine virtues of independence and self-reliance associated with craftsmanship and the 'site lifestyle' (Hayes, 2002; Applebaum, 1999; Thiel, 2007; Ness, 2012) by simply registering work activities and taking them at face-value? I therefore see it as crucial to take into account, and to interpret, the meanings that go into everyday work, as well as how practices shape identities. As outlined by de Certeau (1984), 'the practices of everyday life are filled with meaning and serve to constitute life as it appears to ourselves' (as cited in Styhre, 2004; see also Reckwitz, 2002). This view entails that the ongoing reproduction and negotiation of everyday practices are reliant upon the meanings that people attach to them. Consequently, addressing meaning is crucial to examining practice, and not only the other way around.

In this thesis, I draw on previous studies that forefront meaning-making, lived experience and identity as important aspects of studying managerial work. For example, Tengblad (2012) advocates a practice-based approach to managerial work that is open to the practitioners' lifeworlds and how they experience and cope with the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities of organizational workplaces. Taking a similar approach, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have suggested a need to re-think the work of managers and take into account the 'mundane', i.e., small acts carried out by managers every day at work, such as listening, chatting and gossiping, which are often trivialized, but can have far-reaching, even *extraordinary*, implications on organizational life. Sveningsson et al., (2012, p. 84) later elaborated the notion of mundane, describing the key activity of managers as 'influencing expectations, meanings, and values about what is desirable and necessary to accomplish related to everyday work'. An important aspect of the mundane perspective is the notion that managerial work is not only embedded in a rationalistic logic, but also in more emotional dynamics through which managers strive to shape a coherent sense of their professional selves (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, 2016). This view is prompted by how managers often face difficulties combining positive identities with the complexities and imperfections of modern organizational workplaces. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) introduce the concept of 'identity work' to describe a continuously ongoing struggle where clashes between organizational discourse, role expectations and narrative self-identity constrain managers attempts to uphold a positive self-view. Identity work refers to how managers engage in processes of forming, repairing, maintain, strengthening or revising interpretations that facilitate the creation of a relatively coherent view of themselves, often in relation to their work (p. 1165).

This practice-based approach to managerial work resonates well with my interest in how site managers experience and cope with the complexities and contradictions of their work and

workplaces. It allows me insight into the meanings that site managers attach to their day-to-day work activities and work and life situations, and how they maintain a positive and coherent self-view in a work context that researchers describe as complex, fragmented and 'chaotic'. It also underlines a need to interpret and re-think the significance of mundane acts and activities, and how such activities are potentially linked to wider processes of organizing and structural conditions embedded in the construction industry (papers II and III).

In this thesis, I apply a practice-based approach as an 'umbrella' framework to explore the everyday work of site managers. What I mean by this is that this approach has guided the overall research process. It has also provided an important lens through which I have interpreted the data that has emerged in this process. Under this umbrella framework, I have combined the practice lens with a variety of different theoretical concepts which provided explanatory and explicatory affordances to gain insight into the specific topics addressed in each of the research papers. This includes, gender performativity and embodiment (paper I), professional identity and expertise (paper II), coupling lens (paper III) and autonomy and unobtrusive control (paper IV). These are perspectives that I have deemed to be compatible and suitable to combine with a practice lens. In addition, practice scholars have encouraged application of additional theories and switching theoretical lenses when trailing connections between practices (Nicolini, 2009). I will not outline each of these theories in this chapter but instead refer the reader to the appended research papers for an overview.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The following chapter describes the research design and methods adopted in the thesis. The overall research approach is presented first. This is followed by a description of the research design, including the three sub-studies that the thesis draws on. Afterwards, the data collection methods are described, followed by the method of analysis. The chapter rounds of with some reflections on methodological considerations.

3.1 Research approach

A qualitative approach with an explorative and interpretative focus is adopted for the research carried out in this thesis. According to Bryman (2015), qualitative research methods are characterized by an interpretative knowledge theory, emphasizing how people interpret their social reality and how they act upon these understandings. Other scholars describe interpretative research as a subset of qualitative research, given that not necessarily all qualitative methods keep to a non-positivistic tradition (Prasad and Prasad, 2002). Interpretative research is generally committed to a social constructionist ontology that views reality (or at least parts of it) as a product of people's social meaningful interpretations of the world (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and not as naturally given. An exploratory approach is based on the idea that to gain an in-depth understanding of a research problem, it is fruitful to approach it in fairly broad and open-ended terms (Stebbins, 2001). It involves keeping an open mind and relying on methods that expose the researcher to unexpected occurrences and events (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). This allows the researcher to be flexible and to probe different directions, which means that the research process can take different turns along the way. Explorative research can thus be both time and energy consuming. Such an approach calls for the reflexivity and critical awareness of the researcher to challenge and revise ideas throughout the research process (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009).

Using inductive and interpretative research methods has been suggested as appropriate for studying work practices in general (Nicolini, 2012), and managerial work practices in particular (Tengblad, 2012; Korica et al., 2017). Based on an explorative interpretative approach, a combination of qualitative research methods was chosen for the present research, including interviews, observations and workshops. It has been argued that interviews are well-suited to examine how workers and managers experience and make sense of their everyday work (Alvesson, 2003). However, given that work practices are highly situated, it is also widely recognized, and recommended, that interviews need to be complemented by additional 'field techniques', such as observational methods, which allow the researcher to explore the practices in situ (e.g., Czarniawska, 2007; Barley and Kunda, 2001). This combination of methods was deemed suitable for the purpose of this PhD project, which focuses on site managers' lived experience and how they experience and cope with everyday work.

The complementary methods have built an integrated progression throughout the research process. However, this research progression has been far from linear. It has been a journey riddled with surprises and 'mysteries' (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011) which have pointed me

in directions which I did not foresee when I started my research journey six years ago. While the main focus has remained on site managers' everyday work and work-life experiences, I have also pursued unexpected phenomena that emerged in the research process that I deemed interesting and promising. These include, for instance, resistance (papers I and II), tensions between autonomy and control (papers III and IV) and overwork (papers I and IV). The research process has therefore been characterized by an iterative process, a constant moving back and forth between inquiry of empirical data and inquiry of theory, which is common for explorative research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Langley, 1999; van Maanen et al., 2007).

Following Van de Ven (2007), my ambition has been to carry out 'engaged scholarship' by being attuned to the intellectual challenges of engaging with theories as exploratory and explanatory resources and also wanting to contribute with empirically grounded new and useful insights for practice. An engaged explorative approach has meant that I have followed up on emergent 'hunches' throughout the research process, paying close attention to 'surprising phenomena' that are not easily explained by existing theory (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). For example, the seeds of the ideas for papers III and IV were generated early in the PhD process when I revisited interview data and carried out an in-depth, open-minded dialogue with the data, i.e. I 'listened', 'respected' and 'suspended' my à priory responses before voicing tentative understandings (Isaacs, 1999). Over the course of several years, this iterative dialogue-with-the-data process, countless discussions with colleagues and scholars, field observations, input from reviewers, not to mention a fair amount of doubt (Locke et al., 2008), led to the development, explanation and theorization of the ideas presented in this thesis.

3.2 Research design

My PhD project started in late 2014 and consists of three sub-studies. The following is thus sorted according to these three different studies. The first study is independent, comprising an explorative analysis of data from a number of construction organizations focusing on the leadership of site managers and their managerial work. This data analysis provided me with a 'testing ground' for some of my initial assumptions concerning managerial work in general and in construction specifically. The second and third studies are closely linked, and together form a case study in one single organization aimed at examining the work-life situation of site managers and potential implications for the industry, organization and individual. In this section, I will start with presenting study I. This is followed a brief description of the case study design and the case organization, ConstructED. Afterwards, I will present studies II and III. An overview of the research design and methods, and the three sub-studies is provided in Table 2.

Table 1

Overview of research design and methods

Study/period of time	*Study I/2013 (pre-PhD)*	*Study II/2014-2015*	*Study III/2017-2019*
Focus	Site management work from a 'best practice' perspective	Site managers' work experiences and coping situations	Overwork and autonomy paradox
Organization(s)	Several large – mid-sized construction organizations	ConstructED (case study)	ConstructEd (case study)
Method(s) used	Recordings and transcriptions of open-ended interviews conducted in another project by other researchers including my supervisor.	Open-ended life-story interviews In-house workshop	Open-ended life-story interviews In-house workshop Field observations/shadowing
Practitioners included	12 site managers/interviews 20 construction supervisors and foremen	9 site/project managers (11 interviews in total) 1 production manager 20 workshop participants (managers from operative and strategic levels and HR)	12 site managers (14 interviews in total) 3 business unit managers 2 district managers 1 HR manager 15 workshop participants (managers from operative and strategic levels and HR) Researcher spent nearly three weeks on two construction sites (a hospital and a large housing project) observing the work of two site managers
Data overview	1 – 2 h/interview. Audio recorded, transcribed verbatim (between 10-20 pages per interview and approx. 170 pages in total)	40 min – 2,5 h/interview. Audio recorded, transcribed verbatim (between 10 – 26 pages per interview and approx. 180 pages in total) 27 pages of written field notes/approx. 40 pictures taken on site Workshop audio recorded	1 – 2 h/interview. Audio recorded, transcribed verbatim (between 12 – 22 pages per interview and approx. 200 pages in total) 70 pages of written field notes/approx. 300 pictures taken on site/pamphlets and material collected from the organization's intranet Workshop audio recorded
Miscellaneous		Observations made of the respondent's body language, activities and interactions during the site visits and interviews Exercise conducted during interviews	Field observations: participated in informal conversations with site managers and other actors. Sat in on breakfasts, lunches, breaks. Participated in meetings (17), workshop (1), daily activities and interactions/notes taken
Data included in papers	Early conference papers Empirical backdrop for paper I Individual quotes used for papers II and IV	Main data source for paper I Individual quotes used for papers II, III and IV	Main data source for papers II, III and IV

3.2.1 Study I

The first study was an in-depth analysis of a completed interview study aimed at investigating site managers' leadership roles as well as their day-to-day work practices, activities and responsibilities. The data set included 12 managers and 20 construction supervisors and foremen. The interviews with the site managers were open ended, taking the form of life stories while the superior managers and foremen were asked to comment on their respective site manager's role, work and responsibilities. The interviewees came from several large and mid-sized construction organizations from all over Sweden, including from ConstructED. The collection was purposive; CEO's and top managers from the organizations were asked to name their 'best' site managers. It was not defined what was meant by 'best'; this was left for them to decide. The purpose was to identify managerial competencies, practices and leadership styles that were perceived as successful in the construction organizations. It is therefore important to note that this specific selection is reflected as a bias in the data.

It should also be noted that the data for study I were collected two years prior to my scrutiny. These data were collected and analyzed by participants in a collaborative research project involving researchers from my department, including my supervisor and former examiner. The research was published in a report for Sveriges Byggindustrier (see Josephson et al., 2013). I myself was not involved in the data collection and transcription of the interviews. Neither was the data set generated with my research questions in mind, which can be seen to affect the trustworthiness of this particular study. However, both the aim of the study and the nature of the data had strong relevance to my research project. I was therefore encouraged to utilize the data material for analyses in the current PhD project.

Even though I had not been involved in collecting the data, the other researchers and I believed that it would be valuable to critically (re)scrutinize the data material. I have a background in social science, mainly in work science, rather than engineering, and therefore knew little about construction before I started my PhD at Chalmers. I was therefore able to take an 'outsider' perspective on the data, which allowed me to critically scrutinize the empirical material and to (maybe) challenge previous interpretations. It also allowed me to re-analyze the data with critical eyes to see if I could generate interesting observations that previously had been overlooked. We believed that allowing an outsider with a different background and theoretical lenses to scrutinize the data could be a good way to mitigate bias and to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis (see for example Gioia et al., 2013).

The data from study I was primarily used for analyses in the early explorative phase of my PhD project, especially as a data source to test my assumptions and ideas concerning managerial work for early conference papers. It also functioned as an empirical backdrop to paper I to test the analytical inferences made from the single life-story interview of that paper. It should also be noted that a few individual respondent utterances from study I have been used in the later research papers as well, although these papers predominantly have relied on data generated from studies II and III. The data set has played an important role for my research since some of the ideas that I later pursued in studies II and III can be traced back to the analyses of the initial data material. This includes some of the ideas related to overwork and autonomy, which have

remained a recurrent theme in the research process. A more detailed description of the analytical process for study I is outlined in section 3.4.

3.2.2 Case study research and the research case

The main bulk of data collected for this thesis (see studies II and III) were gathered in a large Swedish construction company, to which I have given the pseudonym 'ConstraCORP' (paper II) and later 'ConstructED' (papers III and IV). I will hereafter refer to the company as ConstructED. It has been suggested that a case study is appropriate when exploring new topic areas (Eisenhardt, 1989) and the unfolding of complex social phenomena (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009), in particular when the boundaries between the phenomena and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009). These are all aspects that applied to my aim and research focus, as well as aligning with overall the practice-based approach adopted in the research. Moreover, I deemed a case study design as appropriate since it would allow me to combine research methods to examine work of site managers from multiple angles, and to capture a 'thick' and detailed description of their daily work (Geertz, 1973).

The construction industries in many countries consist mainly of small and micro-sized organizations (e.g., Dainty et al., 2007). An exception to this image is ConstructED. The company is one of few large multinational construction corporations operating in Northern Europe, employing over 15.000 people and with a yearly turnover of more than 50 billion (SEK), as of 2021. The company holds a relatively large proportion of market shares in the Nordic Countries. The company was established in the 1980s as a part of a merger of several Scandinavian construction companies. The aim of the merger was to establish a large enterprise that could occupy a strong position to compete on several markets in the Nordic Region. During the 90s and early 2000, the company made several major acquisitions in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland and grew to become a major player on the Nordic market. Its main competitors are mainly other large multinational construction companies that grew under the same period and hold large market shares in the Nordic Region.

The company consists of a line organization and a number of central executive units, such as HR, marketing, purchasing and juridical. The line is structured as a matrix, consisting of both geographical and functional units: building, infrastructure, industry and property development. The company's project portfolio is highly diverse, ranging from large complex infrastructure mega-projects involving billions of SEK to small repairment projects involving a few million SEK. The managerial levels in the line organization are as follows: CEO, vice CEOs, functional executives, business unit managers, regional managers, production managers, project managers, and site managers. It should also be noted that the company has made a couple of major re-organizations in the past decade with major changes to both the roles and the organizational units in the company. For example, the project manager-role was fairly new when I started my PhD project, and there had been major changes in responsibilities for many middle-manager roles. However, it was difficult to discern if there had been any major formal alterations to the site-manager role since, according to an HR manager, this role did not have a formal job description in the company at the time (see Sandberg et al., 2018)

Similar to most construction companies, site managers constitute the largest managerial category in ConstructED. In the company, the site manager is de facto project manager for the production phase of construction projects. The role differs though from that of project manager who is generally also responsible for the planning phase of projects, and who usually oversees several projects simultaneously. The immediate superior of both these roles is the production manager.

Site managers have personnel responsibility for all employee categories working for the company within the projects, such as operatives (craftsmen) and supervisors. Similar to the construction industry as a whole, ConstructED is a highly male-dominated company. The proportion of women in leadership positions is on average 14%, whereas among site managers that figure is merely approximate 3%, as of internal figures in 2016. Since then, the company has launched several initiatives to increase the number of female site managers and to diminish discrimination against women and other groups that have a minority status in the company. One such initiative is a trainee program that aims at creating a more inclusive and supportive work environment for women.

3.2.3 Study II

Based on the insights derived from study I, I became intrigued by an interesting tension that kept surfacing in the site managers' stories; on the one hand, they elaborate on a very rewarding and enriching job to which they are highly committed, and on the other hand, they bemoaned a highly demanding and draining work situation that seemed to leave little room for recovery. Since the research questions in study I had not primarily focused on work-life and well-being issues, it left many loose ends regarding experiences and reflections concerning the broader implications of work that I wanted to follow up. Therefore, a second, much longer, study was conducted in a single organization, ConstrucED, in order to further probe interesting issues that had emerged from the analysis in study I, and that I felt needed to be explored further. The aim of study II was therefore to explore how site managers experience and cope with their work, as well as implications of their working pattern on their work-life situation, including aspects of work-life balance, inter-personal relationships at and outside work, and their wellbeing.

An interview design was selected for the data collection. The data was collected in ConstructED during the fall of 2014 until early 2015. The respondents were selected from a list provided by the HR department of site managers who had very recently been appointed to a newly established role at ConstrucED of project managers[1]. The managers were sampled to include individuals with different career backgrounds, gender, age and work-life situations. Although the sample was not large, I wanted to have a relative broadness in the sample in order to capture a variety of experiences and work life realities. The sample consisted of nine site managers and one production manager. One site manager was female, the rest males. The production manager was included since I wanted to probe the site-manager role from multiple

[1]The primary aim of the interviews was to elicit personal life-stories and reflections of the respondents' experiences of their work and coping situations as site managers. A secondary aim was to elicit the new project manager recruits' perceptions and expectations of the new role. For these reasons, these respondents have been labelled as 'project managers' in earlier papers even though the focus was on their work as site managers.

angles and perspectives, including that of the superior manager. Most of the typical construction contexts and projects were represented in the sample, including infrastructure, residential and commercial development projects.

Based on an initial round of interviews, two respondents were selected for additional follow-up interviews in the following years. This was a junior male manager who had worked in the company only a few years, and a senior female manager who had worked in the company her entire career, some 30 years. The reason why these particular respondents were selected was that they had intriguing life stories and two very different approaches to managing their work and work-life situations. They agreed to be followed up and thus formed two individual 'mini cases' to zoom in on and to compare (see Sandberg et al., 2016c). They were interviewed on two occasions each over the course of three years, and they have also participated in the workshops conducted in the research project (see section 5.3.3.).

The life-story and work performances of one of these managers, the female, which I have given the figurative name 'Mona', provides the empirical base for research paper I. Her story is further revisited in research paper IV. Mona has remained an important part in the research process mainly because her story was so full of contradictions. Rather than looking for generalization based on a large number of individuals, I followed the approach of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Muhr (2011) and focused instead on a single person, at least for certain parts of the research. I wanted to take Mona's story seriously and to use her case as an 'insightful example' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) of what it can be like to be a construction site manager. This approach can of course be questioned, but here I relied on the proposal by Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 228) that generalization often is 'overvalued as a source for scientific development, whereas "the force of example" is underestimated'. However, it should be noted that Mona's story does not stand alone as an isolated 'island' in the research process. I have also interviewed people around her, including her closest superior manager. In addition, the total data set includes life-story interviews with a large number of site managers that corroborate many of the insight derived from Mona's story. Furthermore, there are a number of individual case studies focusing women in construction, which are interesting to compare with, especially from a national and cultural perspective (e.g., Fielden, 2000; Denissen, 2010; Ness, 2012).

The data from study II is used for all the appended papers, albeit to a different extent. Individual quotes are used for all the papers although papers II and III rely much more on data generated in study III, which includes interviews with senior managers, as well as field observations. The data has been important in the overall research process since it has revealed many tensions and contradictions underlying the work of site managers and how these relate to wider (structural, cultural, administrative) conditions embedded in the construction industry.

3.2.4 Study III

The third study comprised an extension of the ConstructED case study with combined in-depth interviews and observations of site managers' daily work. Study III had less of an explorative nature, being more theoretically focused on the phenomenon of overwork. In both studies I and II, I had seen a paradoxical phenomenon related to overwork that I found captivating, but had

difficulties articulating and explaining. The phenomenon in question concerns how some site managers seemed to work long hours with the intention of increasing their autonomy, yet in the process of doing so becoming entrapped in a vicious cycle of overwork from which they find it difficult to escape[2]. Although previous studies have revealed similar 'autonomy paradoxes' (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Michel, 2011), these studies provided little guidance in helping me explain the context-specific conditions and circumstances that seemed to drive this paradox in the example of construction site managers. This contextualized autonomy paradox can thus be seen as a mystery in need of an explanation (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011), which I aimed to contribute to through a further investigation.

The interview data were collected in ConstructED from the spring of 2017 until the spring of 2019. The sampling of the site managers was similar to that of study II in that I wanted to capture a variation of individuals with different experiences. The data set included 12 site managers of which two were interviewed on two occasions. Three were females, the rest males. The data set also included six managers employed at various other organizational levels and functions in ConstructED. These were three business-unit managers, two district managers and one HR manager. Similar to studies I and II, the interviews with the site managers took the form of life-stories, although they were slightly more structured in the sense that I wanted to investigate more closely the interrelationship between autonomy, entrapment and overwork (see paper IV). The interviews with the senior managers were different in the sense that I wanted to examine their view on the work, role and responsibilities of site managers. I believed this to be a good approach to gain better insight into the mechanisms and processes that sustain the autonomy paradox.

In addition to the interviews, I also conducted observations of site managers' daily work. These observations were conducted on two construction sites. One of the sites was one of the largest construction projects in Western Sweden at the time – a large hospital that was built over the duration of approximately four years (2016-2020). The other site comprised a relatively large housing project that was built over a period of two years (2018-2020). Observations in the hospital project were conducted during the late spring of 2017 for a period of one week. Observations in the housing project were conducted during the winter of early 2019 for a period of one and a half weeks. Access to the sites was acquired during interviews with the site managers of these projects, when I asked the managers for permission to observe their day-to-day work for a limited period, which they both agreed to.

Study III is used as the predominant data source for paper III and contributes with relevant data for papers II and IV as well[3]. Many of the puzzling phenomena and the questions raised in the previous two studies have acquired tentative explanations through the data collected and the insights derived from study III. However, answering these questions has also generated a range of new questions and puzzling concerns that call for further research. This is something that I will get back to in the discussion and conclusion to this thesis.

[2] The seed to this idea is outlined, yet not fully explained, in the discussion section in my licentiate thesis (Sandberg, 2017). I address and explain this phenomenon more fully in paper IV.

[3] **Note:** In paper III, there is an error in the presented figure of respondents included in the sample. I write that the sample includes 37 site managers in total. The accurate figure is 37 *interviews* with 33 different site managers in total. This is due to a misunderstanding. I have now updated this figure in table 1, as well as in paper IV.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Interviews

All the interview data were collected through in-dept, open-ended interviews using an interview guide that encouraged the respondents to talk freely and recount their work-life stories. This approach entailed that I viewed the interviewees more as storytellers than respondents (Holloway and Jefferson, 2008). The interviewees were ensured anonymity in that all information revealing identification would be omitted in the final research product. They were also offered the possibility of reading the transcripts of the interviews if they so wished. The interviewees were further informed that parts of the interviews would be of a more private nature, concerning how they experience their work situation and including topics as their work-life balance and well-being. None of the respondents expressed concerns or objections with this approach. Some actually expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity to talk and express their concerns regarding what they perceived as an important topic, and which they were seldom given the opportunity to voice.

The location of the interviews with the site managers were most often in a meeting room or the site managers' office located at construction sites in different parts of Western Sweden, or in some cases, at the company's main office in Gothenburg. The interviews with senior managers and HR staff were conducted in the main regional office, with a couple of exceptions. The interviews typically lasted from 40 minutes to 2 and a half hours with an approximate average time of 1 and a half hours. A longer duration allowed space for the site managers' life-stories to evolve and to open up for exploring important facets of their working lives. Before initiating the interviews, the respondents were asked if they had any questions or needed further clarification.

At the outset of the interviews, the interviewees were asked to provide essential biographical data and to briefly present their backgrounds and career trajectories to date. All the interviews were informal, in which open-ended questions that encouraged free storytelling were used to elicit personal narratives and story lines. Within this open frame, the interviewees were provided only with the minimum prompts in order for them to start (and keep) describing their work: 'tell me about your work', 'tell me about a typical day', 'what are your main challenges', 'what does your work mean to you', 'how does your working life affect your non-working life (and vice versa)', and so forth. After this initiation, the interviews typically took the form of casual conversations, with the respondents doing most of the talking. The aim on my side was to keep the interference at a minimum. Free storytelling has been suggested as an appropriate interview technique where the interviewees personal stories are allowed to evolve, and their underlying assumptions, beliefs and worldviews guide the conversation (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In study II, I conducted an interview exercise with the site managers. Toward the end of the interviews, I asked the respondents to sketch out what they viewed as a 'typical workday', from when they got up in the morning until they went to bed in the evening. The purpose of this exercise was to better visualize what the managers working days look like. While writing, I encouraged the respondents to articulate their thoughts so I could take part of their thinking

and reasoning. The exercise was also intended as an overlap and triangulation; while concentrating on one typical day, the respondents repeated some of the information already conveyed, albeit from a different angle, and sometimes in contradictory ways. This provided valuable insights into the ambiguities, tensions and paradoxes in their daily work lives (see paper IV). The exercise was further valuable since it forced the managers to reflect over the timeline of their workdays and to provide insights into details, extent and frequency of certain work (and family) tasks that would have been difficult to capture during the interviews.

In studies II and III, I made and documented observations of the respondents' body language, activities and interactions during the site visits and the interviews. The purpose with this approach was to achieve a thicker and more detailed description of the data that could complement the verbal interview recordings (Svensson, 2014). For example, I wrote down detailed notes of the work setting (e.g., surroundings, building site, office, waiting room, lunchroom, corridors). With permission from the respondents, I took pictures of the work settings with the requirement that I would not publish them. I also took notes of the physical appearance and behavior of the respondents in terms of body posture, clothing, facial expression, dialects, jargon, movements, interactions, conversations and so on (see paper I for detailed accounts). For example, during some of the interview occasions, colleagues to the site managers repeatedly came in and interrupted the interview, asking and/or requiring something of the manager. I then wrote down the responses and interaction of these interruptions and later asked the managers how they experienced these episodes. Directly after the interviews, I sat down (usually in my car or at a bus stop) and wrote down reflections over observed phenomena, events and/or episodes that could complement the recorded interviews and provide novel understanding of their everyday work.

3.3.2 Observations

A combination of participant and non-participant observations was used during the field studies. The primary focus was to follow the site managers in their daily work. The term 'shadowing' has been described as a fieldwork technique where a researcher follows a selected person in his or her occupation for a time (Czarniawska, 2007). It has been described as an appropriate technique for the study of managerial work (Arman et al., 2012; Noordegraaf, 2014). An important reason is that it avoids popular preconceptions of management – for instance, that it merely is constituted by a set of functions – by turning the attention to what managers do in everyday work (see also Mintzberg, 1970). The observation approach that I used was loosely inspired by shadowing. The aspect that attracted me the most was the mobility of shadowing, basically to 'tag along' to see what the managers actually did, how and why throughout their workdays (cf. Korica et al., 2017). Previous studies had described the work practice of site managers in terms of 'muddling through', 'omnipresence', 'coping' and 'firefighting' (e.g., Djebarni, 1996; Styhre, 2012; Bowen et al., 2014). I was curious to see what could lie behind these descriptions and how, and if, they were manifested in practice. Observational data is used as a predominant data source in paper III and as an empirical foundation for organizational theorizing, in line with calls from Barley and Kunda (2001) and Tengblad (2012).

The observations included 'hanging out' in the managers' offices, participating in a variety of meetings (17 in total), participating in a workshop on productivity improvement, having lunch with the managers and their colleagues, following the managers on various quality and safety inspection rounds, listening in on gossip and rumors, following the managers out on site as they dealt with unforeseen problematic situations, among many other activities. Data were documented in extensive field notes and reflections on the notes, approximately 70 pages of written material. This usually occurred either during or directly after the various episodes and sessions, always after consent had been obtained from the involved participants. Some of the meetings were audio-recorded, and, later, the recordings were transcribed. In addition, I took roughly 300 photos on site, with permission from the site managers. For both observation occasions, I was granted my own office space, which allowed me to compile my notes and to reflect over situations and events while on the site.

My observation approach differed from the shadowing technique in that I did not direct constant attention to the managers' activities (Czarniawska, 2007, p. 58). The observations were neither especially 'structured' in the sense that I tried to categorize each and every activity that unfolded in the managers workdays (cf. Mintzberg, 1970). Even though I spent considerable time on carefully observing and documenting everyday activities, my ambition was not to 'quantify' these activities (Korica et al., 2017, p. 166). I was more interested in exploring and interpreting the underlying meaning of these mundane activities (see Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). This approach meant that I *followed up* on various interesting situations that emerged on site (in contrast to strictly *following the manager*). For example, I spent considerable time walking around on site engaging in casual conversations with different actors that I had seen interacting with the site managers in various situations. I could ask them for their view on what happened in a specific situation involving the site manager, or why the situation was dealt with in a particular way, and not in some other way.

At the end of these mini-field studies, I also used interviews as a sort of briefing tool (see Czarniawska, 2014) for the managers to look back and reflect upon the meaning and significance of certain activities and events that had unfolded during their workweek: 'what really happened in that situation?', 'what was the purpose with a particular action?', 'why did you do it in that way?', 'what were the consequences of the action?', 'was the action linked to any other ongoing activity in the project/organization?'. This approach was essential to link specific mundane acts and activities to wider processes and conditions embedded in the organization and the industry (see for example the notion of 'coupling work' in paper III). I experienced this overall combination of methods as useful in probing the site managers' work from a rich variety of perspectives. The observations provide an important part for paper III as essential data source, but they also provide an important empirical backdrop for papers II and III, although they are not 'formally' included as a data source in these papers.

3.3.3 Workshops

Two workshops were conducted at ConstructED as part of the case study. The workshops occurred at two different occasions, and these were organized in collaboration with the company. The workshops have not been used as formal data sources for any of the research

papers. However, they have still filled an important function in the research process as a whole for primarily two reasons. The first reason is that they allowed us to provide important feedback to the organization during the research process. One of the problems with academic research is that practitioners seldom gain timely access to the results of the research. The workshops thus enabled us to provide feedback of the collected data from the ongoing research project. The other purpose was that the workshops also provided us (me and my colleagues) with feedback. It allowed us to test our preliminary interpretations of the analyses and to probe the reactions of the participants. In this sense, the workshops provided a form of double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978) for the researchers and the practitioners. In addition, the feedback obtained from the workshops may then serve as further data (both events were audio recorded and the recordings transcribed, with permission from the participants), and to strengthen triangulation.

The first workshop was conducted in January 2016 as part of study II and included approximately 20 participants. The second workshop was held in early March 2019 as part of study III and included approximately 15 participants. Both workshops, which I held jointly with my supervisor, lasted for approximately four hours each, including coffee breaks. The majority of the participants were managers from both operative and strategic levels in the organization, most of whom work in Western Sweden. In addition, some HR managers and specialists participated. Some of the participants had previously been interviewed in studies II and III.

The overall topic for both workshops was the psycho-social work environment for managers in ConstructED, and how it may be improved. However, the focus of the two workshops differed slightly. The first focused on the psycho-social work environment for managers more generally in the organization. The background to this focus was that several contacts and representatives in the organization had described the work situation for many managers (especially on operative levels) as increasingly stressful and demanding over the past years. The workshop allowed us to present tentative findings regarding how managers themselves experience their work situation, what they see as main challenges and how they cope with their work situation, among other aspects.

The second workshop focused more directly on the role and work of construction site managers. While the site manager-role was regarded as particularly demanding and exposed to stress, many superior managers were puzzled why the site managers rarely accepted the support which was offered them. The workshop offered an opportunity to present some of the tentative findings related to the paradoxical nature of autonomy in site-manager work, and to test the participants reactions of our interpretations. The workshop allowed us, researchers and practitioners, to jointly explore this issue in-depth.

Both workshops had a similar set up. They started with a presentation by the researchers of preliminary findings from the ongoing study that related to the managers' work environment. Afterwards, the set up consisted of group discussions and exercises aimed to generate ideas on how to improve the work environment in the organization. The participants were divided into small groups where they discussed and listed what they perceived as the most predominant pressures and strains in the managers work. The idea was to examine where predominant pressures and demands on their work stemmed from and how it was coped with. This ties directly to the overriding aim and focus of this thesis. Afterwards, the lists were presented and discussed by all, which highlighted important differences and similarities between different

groups and categories of managers. The participants were then again divided into small groups for discussion and to come up with a few concrete suggestions on how the work environment could be improved.

As already mentioned, the data collected from the workshops were not directly included in any of the papers in the thesis. However, the discussions played an important part in providing insight into the conditions that drive and sustain overwork among site managers in relation to autonomy and entrapment. The workshops thus comprise an important empirical backdrop for the thesis, especially papers III and IV.

3.4 Data analysis

An analytical approach inspired by narrative analysis was used to analyze the transcripts of the interviews and observations. Narratives have long been viewed as a fundamental form of human understanding and sensemaking, through which individuals structure and organize their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narratives have increasingly been used in social sciences both as a method of inquiry and a way of presenting and analyzing research findings (Herman and Vervaeck, 2019). Narrative analysis has also become increasingly popular in the field of construction management (CM) (e.g., Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2012; Sergeeva and Green, 2019). In organization studies, research has often used narrative approaches to examine how people and organizations shape their identities, as well as how meaning is created in everyday organizational life (Rhodes and Brown, 2005), not seldom through the lens of power, control and resistance (Humphreys and Brown, 2002).

An important characteristic of narrative analysis is the chronological ordering of events in the stories and a proposed connection between events by the researcher – a plot – which is the basic means by which all the specific events are put into a meaningful whole (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 14). According to this view, the site managers' narratives reflect their work-life experiences, where meaning-making and coping are important parts of the plot. The approach that I used was as follows: I first printed out all the interviews and fieldnote transcripts. I then read and re-read the transcripts multiple times with the purpose of 'spending time' and making myself 'acquainted' with the material (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2015). Through these readings I wrote down keywords in the margin to identify and code the various fragments that made up the narrative. Afterwards, a master document was created where I sorted all these fragments under themes and storylines that linked to an overall plot concerning how the narrators experience and cope with their work. I frequently went back and refined the codes in the transcripts as new insights emerged, which often also led me to go back and refine the plot. Overall, the analysis was characterized by an ongoing iterative process

The analysis of the data in study I differed slightly from the other studies since I had not been involved in collecting the data. A challenge that I faced was that the interview questions covered topics that I initially did not see as relevant for my research, such as lean construction, productivity and standardization. This required me to tentatively sort the material into what I perceived as relevant/irrelevant. It was a bit frustrating when topics emerged that I perceived as interesting and relevant for my research, but were not really picked up and explored sufficiently by the interviewer. For example, I found that topics related to work-life balance,

overwork, wellbeing and freedom constantly kept resurfacing in the stories even when the interviewer did not ask specific questions related to these topics. Similar issues were also raised in the stories of the supervisors and foremen, most often in regard to how they perceived the role of the site manager. This insight made me realize that these issues are important features of site manager-work and manifested across a variation of construction companies of different sizes and orientations. This also prompted me to explore these issues further in study II.

3.5 Methodological considerations

As already mentioned, qualitative interviews provide several advantages when examining how people experience and make sense of their realities at work. There are, however, also limitations with interviews as a methodological approach. Interviews should not be regarded as a technique to convey an undisputable 'truth' about a certain work-life reality from the interviewee to the interviewer. For instance, Alvesson (2003) has shown how impression management underpinned by virtues and ideals in an organization can, and often do – either consciously or unconsciously – confound the interaction between the conversational parties. People generally want to present themselves in a way that makes a good impression of themselves and their workplace. I am fully aware that an interview also involves identity work, not only on the part of the interviewee, but also on the part of the interviewer. However, this limitation may be mitigated in the interviews. For example, the interviewer can ask follow-up questions, ask for clarifications, examine contradictions and ask the same question several times in different ways, even at different occasions, in order to move beyond static and rehearsed presentations and, in this sense, enable a more vivid and, perhaps, realistic portrayal of the topic under study. I have used these types of mitigating-techniques trying to gain a better understanding of the work of site managers. They have been especially useful in understanding some of the tensions and contradictions in their stories that link to the autonomy paradox in study III. As to mitigating my own impression management behaviour and identity work, I have tried as best I could, to critically analyse my own utterances, including tone and pitch, in the interviews

An additional limitation of interviews is that they revolve around how the managers *talk* about their work, and not necessarily what they actually *do* at work (Mintzberg, 1970; Czarniawska, 2007; Tengblad, 2012). Here, the observations have been important in triangulating the interview data, and to gain a better understanding of the actual work practices performed by the site managers in their everyday work. There are, however, also limitations to observations. One such limitation might be that the managers perceive the researcher as an 'outsider', and that he or she adjusts his or her behaviour to make a good impression, i.e., also performing a form of impression management. In ethnographic research, the cardinal rule to overcome this tendency is to conduct the observations for a prolonged period, often a year or more (Czarniawska, 2014). This allows the managers to get accustomed to the presence of the researcher, and it is not unthinkable that the researcher increasingly is thought of as a member of the organization, an 'insider', that the managers start to trust (see for example Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Unfortunately, I did not have the possibility to make such prolonged observations in my study for practical reasons. I see this as a limitation since I believe that it would have been valuable to spend more time following the managers in the projects.

Nonetheless, my impression was that the managers that I observed did not attempt to behave in a way that differed radically from how they usually behave. This was an impression that I got from observing them in a range of different situations and contexts (meetings, interviews, workshops etc.) and through my interactions with other employees on the sites.

4. SUMMARY OF THE PAPERS

The following chapter presents a summary of the four appended papers in the thesis.

4.1 Paper I: Liberating the semantics: Embodied work(man)ship in construction

Purpose: This paper explores how construction managers embody their work and non-work roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis themselves, their co-workers and the organization. In particular, we examine the relationship between an entrenched masculine and normalized inscription of an ideal body and the embodied performances of construction work as these unfold in practice.

Design: In this book chapter, we focus on one respondent's body and its performance in an attempt to discern the perceived experiences, emotions and conceptions of a physical body-in-context in regard to prevalent discursive representations. Our presentation and analysis revolve around the embodied perceptions of Mona, a Swedish female senior site manager, whose story showcase the recursive interplay between subjective agency in regard to the dominant masculine culture in the construction industry.

Findings: The findings highlight nuances and complexities concerning the interplay between embodied subjective agency in regard to prevalent discursive ideal in context. On one hand, Mona's story shows how subjects in the construction industry are constituted in regard to a historically and dominant masculine discourse. However, her story also reveals how her performative enactment cannot be reduced to discursive prescription alone since inconsistencies and ambiguities underlying the ideal opened up alternative subject positions from where she could engage with the discourse to partly rework it to her advantage. She thus used her body to undermine gendered preconceptions and (successfully) resisted the dominant masculine discourse. However, the findings also highlight an inherent tension: in the process of manipulating the masculine discursive ideal, Mona actively contributes to confirm the hegemony of this ideal. This indicates that the disruptions do not have lasting effects on the discourse.

Contributions: The study shows that construction is a rich and fertile empirical context for challenging and expanding social science theorizing on the body and gender, as well as on work. It is shown that women in the construction industry can gain *potential* situational advantages by disrupting and reworking the dominant masculine ideal. However, to avail themselves of these advantages, they have to perform typical traits of the gendered unmarked 'other' (i.e., the man) *as well as* those of their own marked gender. This entails that women's resistance also entails some form of perpetuation of the norm, which highlights an interesting ambiguity. The study thus highlights a need to further address the relationship between

discursive reproduction and resistance as a disruptive force in regard to everyday construction work.

4.2 Paper II: Standardizing the free and independent professional: The case of construction site managers in Sweden

Purpose: This paper explores the work of construction site managers through a professional work and identity lens to emphasize misalignments between initiatives towards standardized production in the construction industry and the situated realities of construction workers. Much previous research concerned with standardization of the construction production process has considered this to be mainly an 'engineering challenge' where barriers to implementation have been considered from rational and instrumental perspectives. In contrast, this paper foregrounds a social perspective to this challenge related to professional work and identity.

Design: The paper draws on data from a longitudinal (2014-2019) case study of site managers' work in a large Swedish construction company (ConstraCORP). The research design is characterized by an overall explorative and interpretative approach based on qualitative semi-structured interviews. The dataset included in the paper draws on interviews with site managers and managers at various other organizational levels and functions in the organization. The analysis foregrounds two contrasting dominant discourses in the interview material: 'standardized construction production' and 'site manager work'.

Findings: The findings show that the work of construction site managers is enmeshed with a particular type of identity and expertise that is ideologically crafted around a proclivity for free and independent work. The findings further show that this ideology is historically rooted in the craft-bound tradition of the industry. Organizational standardization initiatives were generally seen among the site managers as changes that impinged on their freedom and independence and thus posed an immediate threat to their professional work and identities. Based on their positive professional identification, we found that the site managers enacted an ongoing (and successful) resistance to organizational initiatives that are based on principles of standardization. This resistance was generally pragmatic and enacted through what the site managers perceived as 'real' and necessary work (see also McCabe et al., 2020).

Contributions: The study improves the understanding of an unresolved (and overlooked) social challenge that impedes the transformation toward more standardized production in the construction industry. It highlights a need for an increased attention towards the situated realities and perspectives of professionals working at the micro-level of the industry, especially in relation to change initiatives that rest upon principles of standardized production. This does not entail that these 'bottom-up' perspectives should be uniformly favored. Instead, we argue for a better alignment between standardization visions and intentions vis à vis the situated realities of professional work.

4.3 Paper III: Working in a loosely coupled system: exploring practices and implications of coupling work on construction sites

Purpose: The construction industry is often described as a loosely coupled system where there are loose couplings between actors on industry level and tight couplings between activities undertaken on construction sites (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). While much previous research has addressed the 'loose' characteristics of coupling system on industry level, the paper complements this perspective by exploring what it means to work within the tightly coupled part of the system. It does so by examining the day-to-day work activities of site managers who often been said to have a hub-like role in managing and coordinating activities on construction sites.

Design: The paper draws on qualitative data gathered in a large Swedish construction company (ConstructED). The research design is characterized by a case study design combining qualitative open-ended interviews with site managers and observations (shadowing) of two site managers over the course of three weeks. Observational data was further gathered in relation to the site visits for many of the interviews, of which some lasted up to half a workday. The interviews and observations elicited the wider significance and outcome of the mundane work activities in relation to the structural (loosely coupled) characteristics of the construction industry.

Findings: The in-depth exploration revealed an interesting duality underlying the site managers' everyday work: On the one hand, the site managers workdays consisted of fairly mundane activities (e.g., making phone calls, engaging in conversations, participating in meetings) that filled an important coordinating function in the projects – they served to produce and reproduce tight coupling between building activities. On the other hand, there was also a territorial function behind these activities – the site managers intentionally coupled the activities in a certain way that circumvented organizational control and 'tightened' their own authority and control over the projects. In this manner, they reinforced their role as indispensable 'hubs' *within* the projects (cf. Styhre and Josephson, 2006) and ensured that they remained loosely coupled to organizational operations *outside* the projects. We introduce the concept of 'coupling work' to theorize the interlinkage between the mundane managerial work activities and the reproduction of the loose/tight coupling conditions characterizing the construction industry. We propose that coupling work is 'extraordinary' from mundane coordination work in the sense that it has a dual function that is *more* than coordination; it both serves to reproduce tight coupling and loose coupling at the same time. We further propose that the reason why site managers enact coupling work lies in that it prevents standardization of their work and safeguards their autonomy.

Contributions: The paper contributes to debates on change and development in the construction industry by showing that (and how) coupling work is produced and reproduced with the intention to preserve the autonomy and control of site managers. The paper thus highlights real and potential challenges and pitfalls related to situated everyday work on site.

These challenges warrant serious reflection when attempting to re-configure coupling patterns in the system, or for that matter, when introducing 'new' ways of working in the projects, that threaten the site managers free and independent work lives. Similar to paper II, the study calls for a need to better align the visions and intentions in construction organizations with the situated lived realities of the people working at the micro-level of the loosely coupled system.

4.4 Paper III: Autonomy paradox and entrapment in the construction industry: the case of overworked site managers

Purpose: Site managers have been said to perform one of the toughest jobs in the construction industry which often requires them to work excessively long and irregular hours. Although previous research has reported on the detrimental effects of overwork on site managers wellbeing and family lives, few qualitative studies have examined their perceptions and subjective reasoning around this working pattern. Drawing on theories of autonomy and organizational control, the aim of the study is to examine site managers' work situation and related wellbeing implications by exploring how they think and talk about their work.

Design: The paper draws on rich qualitative data based on in-depth life story interviews with site managers collected in a large construction company in Sweden. An interpretative approach based on narrative analysis is used to elicit the site managers' stories. The presentation and analysis revolve around the site managers' perceptions and reasoning concerning a working life reality characterized by excessive overwork, physical health problems and work-family conflict.

Findings: The study identifies two predominant narratives through which the site managers justify excessive overwork while simultaneously rationalizing its detrimental effects on their wellbeing: the 'narrative of advancement', which is career-oriented, and the 'narrative of preservation', which is autonomy-oriented and aimed at safeguarding their current job role. The study shows that tensions and contradictions in these narratives can create an 'autonomy paradox' (Mazmanian et al., 2013), within which the site managers entrap themselves into an endless loop of overwork whilst convincing themselves that they are acting autonomously. Based on these insights, I suggest that autonomy in the site managers' work role might conceal an unobtrusive control mechanism that is potentially exploited indirectly in the favor of the firm yet sustains the impression that the managers are *increasing* their autonomy. The forces that curtail the site managers' autonomy seems to emerge gradually over long time, and largely out of their awareness. This makes the control mechanism especially powerful. I further propose that entrapment can constitute a third narrative of justification; it provides a rationale for why site managers *continue* to justify excessive overwork when overwork has eroded their non-working lives.

Contributions: The study contributes to construction management research (CMR) by revealing the existence of an unobtrusive, yet powerful, control mechanism that hitherto has been unaccounted for. The study highlights that individual workers, organizations, researcher

and policy makers need to be sensitive to the dynamic and complex interplay between autonomy and organizational control in understanding how entrapment unfolds. The study calls for a need to explore the phenomenon of overwork in construction from the perspective of organizational control, especially through lenses that allow researchers to disentangle tensions, contradictions and paradoxes underlying the phenomenon.

5. KEY-FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This thesis set out to examine the everyday work of construction site managers from a practice perspective. An explorative and interpretative research approach was chosen combined with various qualitative methods. An explorative approach coupled with a practice perspective has built a progression in the research process, which has successively highlighted increasing complexity and contradictions underlying the work of site managers. This progression can be divided into three steps for which I have adopted different theoretical perspectives to examine the complexity of their work. The *first* step focuses on how they experience and cope with their work, which reveals an underlying pattern of normalization. The *second* step focuses on the notion of autonomy, which reveals an unexpected pattern of entrapment. The *third* step focuses on the practice of 'coupling work', which reveals a paradoxical tension between pressure and indispensability. Although I describe them as steps to facilitate understanding, it should be noted that the three foci were in fact intertwined, and when I concentrated on one, insights for the other two were simultaneously gained. In this chapter, I will holistically discuss the findings that have emerged in the appended research papers in regard to these three different steps. In doing so, I will also answer the research questions posed in the introduction of the thesis.

5.1 Site managers coping with work or normalizing overwork?

The initial step in my PhD project focused on examining how site managers experience and cope with their daily work. This focus also provided the overall framing in my licentiate thesis (Sandberg, 2017). This focus was prompted by preliminary analyses of an existing data set (see Study I), as well as my own reading of previous research that had described site managers' work as characterized by a demanding work environment, a reactive coping pattern and excessively long working hours (e.g., Davidson and Sutherland, 1992; Djebarni, 1996; Hanyes and Love, 2004; Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Styhre, 2011, 2012; Mäki and Kerosuo, 2015). Although previous research had addressed coping as a central aspect of site managers' work, I was surprised by how little research actually examined how they coped with their everyday work in practice (or their work practices in general, for that matter). To me, answers to the questions of *how*, not to mention *why*, or even *if* they cope, remained somewhat elusive. My ambition was therefore to contribute to research on managerial work and leadership in construction with an in-depth exploration of the everyday work of site managers.

From one perspective, the findings in this thesis confirm previous accounts of site-manager work as characterized by hectic and fragmented coping patterns and long working hours. Many site managers experienced their work as highly demanding and unpredictable, and they often felt that their planned work activities were constantly interrupted by unforeseen disturbances that threatened to cause breakdowns and delays in production (papers I and III). Consequently, they often felt that they were engaging in 'firefighting' activities and were solving problems constantly, and consequently reactively, as these cropped up. These findings align with Styhre's (2012) notion of site manager-work as 'muddling through' and Holmberg and Tyrstrup's (2010) conceptualization of managerial leadership as an 'event-driven activity'. Due to the

unpredictable nature of their work, many site managers saw it as more efficient to improvise and tackle problems in the moment rather than relying too much on long-term planning (see also Lindblom, 1959). To cope with the pressures and demands of their work, most of the site managers worked excessively long hours, not seldom up to 60, 70, even 80, and in some extreme cases up to 100 hours per week. Many acknowledged detrimental effects of this extreme overwork on their health, wellbeing and family lives even if rather reluctantly (paper IV).

In this in-depth exploration of coping among site managers, I also found an interesting and more surprising pattern. There was a tendency among the site managers to normalize overwork, especially its detrimental consequences on their health and non-work lives. This pattern kept resurfacing in the interviews. Normalization could take the form of trivializing, marginalizing and 'talking away' health and family problems caused by overwork. In their stories, the managers reframed these problems so that they would appear less incongruous and bizarre and instead presented as typical (normal) features of their work. From one perspective, the managers could talk freely and complain about the mental and physical strain caused by the long working hours and how work had become a detrimental and toxic factor in their lives. This included, for example, how long-term overwork caused stress, anxiety, high blood pressure, diminished family functioning, divorces and loss of friends. Yet, from another perspective, however, the same site managers contradicted themselves by trivializing these accounts of overwork, portraying the detrimental consequences as if these were expected and ordinary features in their professional lives: 'as a site manager, you are expected to have a couple of divorces behind you' one of them said (paper IV; Sandberg et al., 2016b; 2018). For these site managers, it did not necessarily entail a contradiction to describe their health and family lives as 'collateral damage' to overwork while later in the same interview stating that they have 'a good work-life balance' (paper I).

It is difficult to explain this behavior from previous theories of construction work and the work of site managers. As mentioned in the introduction, previous studies have commonly explained site managers overwork as an outcome of external pressures and demands from various macro-level characteristics and developments in the construction industry (e.g., Davidson and Sutherland, 1992; Haynes and Love, 2004; Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Styhre, 2006, 2012; Polesie, 2013). However, pressures derived from external factors, e.g., loose coupling of projects and standardization do not adequately explain why site managers felt compelled to normalize the detrimental effects of the overwork and why they consistently seemed to resist offers of organizational support that could alleviate their pressured work-life situation (papers III and IV). Studies that have looked at internalized pressures are fewer and have often addressed site managers' overwork as an outcome of the dominant masculine culture in the industry, which favors an ideal of loyalty and commitment to the project, long working hours and constant availability (e.g., Watts, 2009; Turner et al., 2009; Styhre, 2011; Ness, 2012; Malone, 2013). From this perspective, the site managers can be seen to have internalized this ideal as their own and to act upon the norms and expectations associated with it. The connection between overwork and masculinity has been said to be particularly salient among site managers since the masculine culture in construction favors a paternalistic ideal where the predominantly male managers are expected to be autonomous, self-reliant, in control and willing to work long hours (Styhre, 2011; Arditi et al., 2013; Raiden, 2016).

This connection can also be seen as sustained by a traditional craftsman ideology and mindset still prevalent in the industry (Steiger and Form, 1991; Applebaum, 1999; Hayes, 2002; Thiel, 2007; Ness, 2012). The managers subjective reasoning and justification of overwork seem to be entangled with, and draw much of its rhetoric from, a masculine craftsman identity (e.g., Mills, 1951; Kondo, 1990; Sennett, 2008). As suggested by Kondo (1990), enduring hardship in silence, 'getting things done' and performing one's skillful labor with the limited resources available and despite burdensome conditions can be seen to lie at the heart of the craftsman identity. There were many manifestations of this in the site managers stories. They hesitated to ask for help when needed and they took great pride in finalizing their projects without interference from 'outsiders' (papers II and III). Additional research has shown that identification with an ideal of autonomous and self-reliant site-work is not only limited to craftsmen on construction sites but permeates all organizational levels in construction firms all the way up to the boardroom (Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2014).

Linkages between the ethos of overwork, craftsmanship and a masculine ideal of autonomy are many in this thesis. This is addressed explicitly in paper I, but also more or less implicitly in all the appended papers. The findings support the notion that behaviors such as overwork, presence and presenteeism hold a symbolic meaning that signifies what it means to be a successful site manager (cf. Watts, 2009). However, the masculine ethos of overwork does not in itself explain why the site managers themselves seemed to normalize overwork by trivializing and marginalizing its detrimental effects on their lives. In order to explain this, it is necessary to address what the phenomenon of overwork *means* to the site managers, and how they rationalize and make sense of it in regard to their health, wellbeing and social relationships outside work. In order to do so, I will draw on previous studies that have addressed these issues outside the context of construction.

In his book *Engineering Culture* (1992), Kunda has shown that being overworked is a phenomenon that has dual meaning in organizations and is therefore ambiguous. On the one hand, it gives a negative impression since it signifies that the employee has lost the ability of self-management (p. 199). Crossing the boundary of one's own limitations and losing the ability to distance oneself from work are signs of poor self-control and inability to handle pressure. On the other hand, however, being overworked is not only seen as entirely negative since it sends a positive message that the employee has invested his/her whole being in the organization. It symbolizes that the employee is willing to give everything to work – the ultimate sign of commitment, self-sacrifice and willingness to advance in the organization (p. 203). Additional studies have shown that the ability to manipulate the system of corporate symbols, rather than hard work itself, is more crucial for career success (Jackall, 1988; see also Reid, 2015). These studies suggest that expressing a 'controlled display' (Kunda, 1992) of their overworked selves can have certain advantages for employees.

The findings in this thesis suggest that a dominant ideal for site managers was to be autonomous. For many site managers, freedom, autonomy and self-reliance at work seem to represent an ideological focal point around which they have crafted their professional identities (papers II and III, see also Kondo, 1990). This masculine ideal persisted even among the female site managers. An important insight related to this is that surprisingly many managers seemed to identify so strongly with this ideal that they were skeptical of, even adverse to, the idea of career advancement (paper IV). Gaining a promotion in the firm would imply that they would

move further away from the core operations in the building process, and they would lose much of their craft-inculcated autonomy, self-reliance and pride associated with being a manager of a construction site (paper IV). They would feel more like an average middle manager, and less like an indispensable 'CEO' of their own (mini)organization, i.e., the project (cf. Styhre, 2006; Polesie, 2013). This is an important novel context-dependent finding that deviates from much previous research on overwork, which has tended to emphasize promotability and career advancement as important aspects of why professionals work long hours (e.g., Kunda, 1992; Grey, 1994; Bailyn, 2006; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Reid, 2015; Lupu and Empson, 2015). This empirical insight coupled with Kunda's (1992) and Jackall's (1988) theoretical insights of the symbolism of overwork can be used as an analytical tool to scrutinize the relationship between overwork and the masculine ideal of autonomy and self-reliance.

The strong positive identification with the ideal of autonomy could explain why the site managers justified the detrimental wellbeing effects of overwork. The various stories of how managers, for instance, work while ill, sleep at the office, attest invoices in the TV sofa with a child on their knee and sneak out of bed in the middle of the night to go to work can be seen as embodied signs of their independence and self-reliance. Howsoever harmful and dysfunctional these behaviors may be, they were also to an extent satisfying for the managers (paper I; Sandberg et al., 2016) since it sends an overall positive message (both to themselves and to others) that they are in full control and able to manage *their* projects no matter what the circumstances (Kunda, 1992). When the managers abuse their bodies in excessive overwork, the physical manifestations of this abuse – stress, overweight, high blood pressure, divorces, and burnout – signify the ability to live up to the ideal they desire. In this sense, they have proven themselves to be independent and self-reliant, and their autonomy is validated (paper IV). In other words, they gain something from behaving in this way. These findings go beyond the image of site manager' (over)work as a coping response to external pressures in construction (e.g., Davidson and Sutherland, 1992; Djebarni, 1996; Hanyes and Love, 2004; Styhre, 2012) and it highlights a much more complex and dynamic process underpinning internalized pressures resulting from identification with a masculine ideal, which has not really been addressed in construction management research (CMR).

The findings further provide an important clue to understanding the paradoxical pattern in the managers' stories when they openly displayed and complained about health and family issues and later trivialized these same issues. When the managers 'confessed' their problems to me during the interviews, this can be interpreted as a kind of narrative evidence of their 'victimization' by an overly demanding work situation that takes a toll on their bodies and family lives (Gabriel, 1995). By establishing themselves as victims in the narrative, they set a certain scene where they present themselves as performing their work against all odds. From a gender perspective, such 'confessions' might be understood as a weakness that stands in conflict with the macho and heroic site manager ideal (e.g., Hayes, 2002; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Raiden, 2016). However, by setting the scene in this way, they open up for the possibility to transform the plot through their deliberate and agentic actions in a way that strengthens their self-image (paper I). The transfer from confession to trivialization can be interpreted as a move to conjure up heroism through the deliberate actions that they perform. For example, they do not only perform their work under strenuous conditions, they manage to perform it *despite* the strain. In this sense, being overworked is not (only) seen as a weakness (Kunda, 1992), it is also

a token that they are *true* site managers (Ness, 2012). It also indicates that they are able to manipulate the image of themselves in an attempt to increase and safeguard their autonomy (paper IV; cf. Jackall, 1988; Reid, 2015).

An apparent feature in the data is how normalization of overwork is linked to how the site managers justify sacrifices to their health and non-working lives. There is thus a need to further explore and theorize the different rationales and regimes of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) present in the managers daily work and how these are linked to various institutionalized conditions embedded in their work context. In paper IV, I contribute with an embryo to such theorization by highlighting two contrasting narratives of justification: the *narrative of advancement* (which is future and career-oriented) and the *narrative of preservation* (which is autonomy-oriented and role-protecting). The first narrative illustrates how site managers perceive and rationalize overwork as an investment for their careers. The rationale underlying this narrative is well-researched and foregrounds career advancement as a normative ideal for personal development and self-actualization, which might implicate self-disciplinarily mechanisms (e.g., Grey, 1994; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Costas and Grey, 2014; Bailyn, 2006; Costas et al., 2016).

The narrative of preservation is more surprising since it shows that craft-based virtues related to autonomy and indispensability provide a much more important basis for justification. This is something that is also touched upon by Ekman (2012) when she highlights the seductive influence of indispensability ('being the chosen one') in knowledge work organizations, and how this contributes to intensify work pressures. According to Ekman, the notion of indispensability conjures a feeling of being special, unique and capable of accomplishing 'marvelous things' (p. 101), which can be simultaneously highly seductive and pressuring. It focuses innate talent rather than concrete skills and revolves around the ideal of transgressing limits and harnessing personal potential. What is interesting is that Ekman makes a separation between the notion of indispensability, which she associates more with limitless potential and the ability to deliver the 'personal touch', and craft, which is considered more routine-minded and impersonal. The findings in my thesis suggest that it is difficult to make this separation in the role of site managers. The site managers strove to preserve their indispensability in the projects (through overwork) so they could preserve their work and identities as craftsmen (paper III) in a context that is characterized by increasing standardization (paper II). Similar to Ekman's study, the site managers were highly motivated by delivering their 'personal touch' to the projects and the buildings. But they also saw craftsmanship as a precondition for the ability to continue to deliver this personal touch. Consequently, I agree with the suggestion that the meaning of overwork and indispensability is context-dependent in relation to industry and occupation, and needs to be studied as such (Ekman, 2014). This thesis offers an insight into what these phenomena mean in the context of construction, which is an empirical context that remains underexplored in social sciences (Sage and Vitry, 2018).

These findings provide, if not a new, then at least a different perspective on understanding overwork as a complex, multifaceted and meaningful phenomenon rather than a one-directional outcome of industry conditions. Overwork can be understood both as a manifestation of how site managers reactively cope with a constraining work situation *and* how they proactively mobilize this hard-working image of themselves to expand their influence and autonomy. This goes to the heart of the contradictory, Janus-faced image of site managers outlined in the

introduction to this thesis. It does not necessarily seem to entail a contradiction to be powerful and influential and powerless and constrained at the same time. Both images do not only seem to be accurate, but also *normal* in the work lives of construction site managers. The findings lend weight to previous research that has explained the work situation of site managers in relation to masculine norms and craftsmanship (e.g., Styhre, 2011; Watts, 2009; Raiden, 2016; Thiel, 2007; Arditi et al., 2013), but they also highlight a need to further delve into the contradictions and paradoxes related to work which are evidently important in reproducing these ideals.

5.2 Autonomy and entrapment … in the seeming absence of control

In the second step of the research process, I critically scrutinized the notion of autonomy in relation to the site managers' working pattern of excessive overwork. In the previous step, we saw that struggling to become and remain autonomous is an important reason why site managers tend to overwork. However, when exploring this phenomenon in-depth, I also found that autonomy seems to be a much more ambiguous and paradoxical phenomenon than previously recognized in construction research (cf. Applebaum, 1999; Riemer, 1982; Hayes, 2002; Styhre, 2011; Thiel, 2013). The ambiguity became apparent when I asked the managers how they perceived their role and responsibilities. Most of them insisted that they saw their role as free and that they had the autonomy and authority to manage their projects independently. One of the most apparent features in their stories was that the freedom to run the projects independently was important to them, and something that they desired. However, at the same time as the managers saw themselves as free, and valued freedom as one of the most important features of their job, they did not seem particularly free when they described their work-life situation. They complained about how their role was tied to all too many responsibilities and expectations, yet they were reluctant to relinquish any of these responsibilities (paper III). Their role was described as a 'superman ideal' that they coveted, yet at the same time felt unattainable for them (paper I). They wanted to be self-reliant, yet they complained about how lack of organizational support caused them to work excessively long hours and feel lonely (Sandberg et al., 2018). After working under pressure for several years, many managers felt that their overwork eroded their non-working lives, and they started to feel trapped and unable to change their lifestyle (paper IV). Paradoxically, at the same time as they enjoyed their seemingly autonomous work situation, they expressed a need to resist it, and even escape from it, in order to attain a sustainable life situation.

For professionals who identify themselves as autonomous, what is there then to resist? If they are autonomous, why do they not exert self-control to manage their situation as they desire and to satisfy their needs? Scholars in organization studies have started to address the complexity underlying these questions (e.g., Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Michel, 2011; Ekman, 2012; Costas and Grey, 2014; Robertson and Swan, 2003; Lupu and Empson, 2015). Of particular relevance for my study is an interesting phenomenon called the 'autonomy paradox' (Mazmanian et al., 2013), which entails that 'the more autonomy employees have, the harder they work, the more hours they devote, and the more organizations control their lives'

(Putnam et al., 2014, p. 427)[4]. Research has shown that autonomy paradoxes are often fueled by indirect (unobtrusive) control mechanisms that operate out of individual awareness, such as socialization (Michel, 2011), ambition (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009) and peer pressure (Barker, 1993). The distributed and less visible nature of such controls often make them difficult to recognize and resist, which often makes them especially powerful (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009). Employees might then internalize intensified work pressures that are under organizational influence whilst believing these pressures to be 'self-chosen' (Michel, 2011; Lupu and Empson, 2015). Other studies have emphasized more opportunistic explanatory models where employees might desire to be exploited in certain periods since this also generates opportunities for them to exploit the organization (e.g., Ekman, 2014).

Many of the studies that have addressed these issues have done so in the context of professional and knowledge work (with a special fondness towards management consulting). I would argue that addressing them in the context of construction is particularly relevant. Here, quite a large body or research has argued that the industry lacks an effective management control apparatus to influence site personnel (e.g., Stinchcombe, 1959; Applebaum, 1981, 1999; Riemer, 1982; Steiger and Form, 1991; Hayes, 2002; Thiel, 2007, 2013). This has been said to be due to the industry upholding a 'craft organization' (Stinchcombe, 1959) and a 'craft ideology' (Steiger and Form, 1991) that resist bureaucratization, and sustain an ideal of worker autonomy. Rather than being controlled directly, it is suggested that site operations are characterized by an 'orchestration of work' where site personnel need to be 'trusted' to carry out their job in line with collective work ethics (Thiel, 2007; see also Gouldner, 1954). Considering the emphasis put on trust and autonomy surprisingly few studies have addressed the potential existence of more indirect control mechanisms. Some notable exceptions are Clegg (1976), Baarts (2009) and Styhre (2010), but could there be other mechanisms that have been overlooked? Of course, it should be noted that there are studies that have questioned the image of construction work as free and autonomous. Eccles (1981), for instance, argued that the construction industry indeed holds bureaucratic elements. Studies that have taken a labor process perspective have further argued that the semi-bureaucratic characteristics of the industry enable even more manipulative forms of control, as compared to other industries Silver, 1986). More recently, Styhre (2006) suggested that the professionalization of the construction project management function has led to an increasing bureaucratization of site managers' work.

The findings in this study corroborate that the site manager role has been subject to increasing administration and paperwork due to bureaucratization, which has increased the pressure on their already pressed work situation (paper II and III). This can be understood as an increased bureaucratic control of site managers' work operationalized through adherence to formalized procedures and constant written reporting mechanisms' (Styhre, 2006). However, despite the pressure from increasing bureaucratization, they still saw themselves as autonomous

[4]In this thesis, I rely on the following definition of autonomy by Mazmanian et al. (2013, p. 1337) as the ability for an individual or a team to 'exercise a degree of control over the content, timing, location, and performance of activities'. I rely on the following definition of organizational control by Alvesson and Kärreman (2004, p. 424) as 'the exercise of power (influence) in order to secure sufficient resources, and mobilize and orchestrate individual and collective action towards (more or less) given ends'.

and in control. And more importantly, they saw themselves as capable of offering effective resistance to unwanted bureaucracy whenever they felt that this impinged upon their freedom (papers I and II). This too can be explained through the lens of normalization; historically, site managers have been seen as rulers of their site 'kingdoms' (Sauer et al., 2001), or 'baronies' (Gann et al., 2012) – a powerful role they have difficulties relinquishing. We could therefore argue that their self-imposed overwork is a manifestation of them hanging on to this role as it is rapidly becoming an anachronism. Therefore, bureaucratic control does not in itself explain the site managers' justification of their extreme work practice at the same time as they felt trapped and expressed a desire to resist work. Instead, it is evident that issues of identity threats and identity work are in motion here (Kondo, 1990; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), which need to be taken into increasing consideration in further research.

The findings in this study point in a direction which has previously not been highlighted in construction research. The findings suggest that the site managers' daily work practices conceal an unobtrusive control mechanism that effectively entraps them into a vicious cycle of overwork that erodes their autonomy yet sustains the impression that they are *increasing* their autonomy. This is the essence of the autonomy paradox (Mazmanian et al., 2013). A reason why this unobtrusive control is so effective, I suggest, is that it is not primarily located in the sphere of work, but in their sphere of non-work – a view that remains underexplored in previous research. In the previous section, we saw how site managers tend to overwork with the intention to increase their autonomy. We also saw how their excessive overwork can often have quite serious effects on their social and family lives (paper IV). What struck me in their stories was that they often realized *how* devastating the effects were only when it was 'too late', often through a divorce, severe health problems or losing all their friends (Sandberg et al., 2018). They often found themselves in a position where they felt that work is all they have left in their lives, and it became increasingly difficult to distance themselves from work and to create and maintain coherent non-work identities (being a good parent, a spouse, a friend etc.) (paper IV). They thus felt trapped. Paradoxically, this insight often led work to become *increasingly* important for these managers, and they continued to justify a lifestyle that revolves around work. At least at work, they could maintain their identities as indispensable 'kings' over the site realm, while the non-work realm became increasingly hollow.

This pattern provides a novel insight into the paradoxical nature of autonomy in the work lives of construction site managers. It shows that their efforts to increase their autonomy at work can trigger unintended effects that cause them to feel trapped by work. Entrapment can thus be seen to constitute a third narrative of justification. It provides a rationale why site managers *continue* to choose to overwork as it becomes increasingly difficult for them to conceive of other options. At the same time, it is shown that entrapment can be an outcome of tensions and contradictions that emerge in the other two narratives of justification, especially the narrative of preservation. In this sense, entrapment complements the understanding of these narratives, including their interrelationship, and is therefore an important contribution that warrants further research.

These insights raise a provocative question: *is the paradoxical tension between autonomy and entrapment among site managers indirectly exploited by construction organizations to sustain a regime of long working hours?* This is an important question, especially for critical management researchers. Based on my data, I can only tender some qualified speculation.

Based on my interpretation of interviews with a large number of site managers, HR managers and various other higher-level managers in ConstructED, my impression is that the organization indirectly benefits from certain aspects of the entrapment syndrome. Due to the complexity and the loosely coupled configuration of construction projects, it seems unavoidable that considerable pressure is being put on site managers. It seems as if the company *needs* a skilled 'hub' who maintains an overview of the complexity of the situation and who is willing to solve whatever problems crop up (day and night). At the end of the day, the organization *needs* a loosely coupled 'project baron' who is willing to make considerable sacrifices and who they can rely on to keep the production going at all costs (including health and family life) simply because this is how value is created in an industry characterized by high uncertainty and an average low profit margin (cf. Gann et al., 2012). Seen in this light, I believe it is somewhat convenient for construction organizations to have independent/trapped site managers who are 'all work' (Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). For this type of person, you do not need a formal role description or even control their work (directly) (paper IV; Sandberg et al., 2018), for they will do whatever it takes to deliver a successful project which, of course, lies in the interest of the organization.

While these speculations need to be corroborated or refuted by further studies, they underline the importance of engaging with autonomy as an inherently ambiguous and paradoxical phenomenon. The boundaries between autonomy, control and resistance appear to be considerably muddled in context of construction and the work of construction site managers.

5.3 Managing construction sites: Mundane coordination work or extraordinary coupling work?

As a final step of the research process, I adopted a practice perspective inspired by Tengblad (2012) and Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2003) to explore the situated work-life realties of site managers against the backdrop of the structural characteristics of the construction industry. In the previous steps, I had seen that the work practice of site managers was influenced by various characteristics and conditions embedded in the construction industry, but this influence seemed much more complex than previous studies had acknowledged (papers I and III). Rather than taking the influence of these conditions for granted, I wanted to turn the perspective around to see what insights into site managers' mundane work activities could reveal about these conditions.

Here, I returned to the idea that the work practice of site managers is influenced by the loosely coupled structure of the construction industry, with an openness to the possibility that this structure is also influenced by the work performances of these managers. I had realized that many of the issues that kept resurfacing in the study – overwork, resistance, autonomy and control – hinge on, or can hinge on the loose and tight coupling problematic conceptualized by Weick (1976). This problematic implies that all loosely coupled systems are accompanied by a certain set of functions and dysfunctions that both offer advantages and pose liabilities for organizations. Dubois and Gadde (2002) picked up on this idea when suggesting that the configuration of the construction industry as a loosely coupled system allows construction organizations to 'cope with certain aspects of complexity' (p. 623) in the building process

(short-term advantage) while it simultaneously 'hamper[s] innovation and learning' (p. 621) in the industry (long-term liability). In the thesis, I expand this idea by showing that the loose/tight coupling duality in construction contains certain affordances and constraints that can, and often are, manipulated by the line organization as well as by the project organizations for different purposes. I show that there is a power dimension embedded in the loosely coupled construction system that entails a form of contestation and resistance performed by site managers that can both facilitate and hinder the operations of construction organizations.

A key to understand this contestation lies in what my co-authors and I have conceptualized as 'coupling work' (see paper III). Coupling work denotes a managerial work practice through which site managers tightly couple site activities through mundane coordination work. However, they do so in a particular way that circumvents organizational control, and 'tightens' their own authority and control over the projects. In this sense, coupling work does not only have a coordinating function, but also a territorial function aimed at keeping a tight reign over the project and to ensure that the projects remain loosely coupled to the control and governance of the parent organization. What was especially interesting with this form of 'pragmatic resistance' (McCabe et al., 2020) underlying coupling work was that it was facilitated by the loose coupling to the parent organization. Loose coupling allows the space and flexibility needed for the site managers to improvise and constantly establish new, 'unique' coupling procedures that militate against unwanted standardization.

The mechanisms of coupling work are elaborated more in detail in paper III. In this section, I want to highlight an aspect of coupling work that can provide a deeper theoretical understanding of the findings in the two previous sections. That is, coupling work, when successfully enacted, increases the site managers indispensability in construction projects, which reinforces the autonomy paradox they find themselves in. On the one hand, it allows them to reinforce their role as indispensable hubs of coordination in the projects (cf. Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Fryer, 1979), which is validated by the loose coupling to the parent organization and allows them to preserve their autonomy. On the other hand, increased indispensability becomes a burden for the site managers as coordination of site activities comes to revolve more and more around them as persons. This puts massive pressure on them to constantly be present and available to ensure coordination of site activities, which in practice means to overwork. The findings show that indispensability could make it almost practically impossible for the site managers to leave the site without causing disturbances and breakdowns (*decoupling*) in production. Consequently, they were often reluctant to do so, even when severely ill (papers I and IV).

Coupling work, and the indispensability it seemingly produces, is thus a practice that may increase site managers' autonomy, but it simultaneously 'shackles' them to the site. Another way to put it is that their autonomy becomes conditioned by their ability and willingness to be present and work long hours on site. In this sense, overwork might be seen as an integral and normal feature of coupling work. This is an important finding since it shows that coupling work contributes to drive the autonomy paradox. It is also important since it shows that normalization of overwork is not only an outcome of symbolic conditions and processes, as I argued in the first discussion sub-section, but also connects to structural and material conditions embedded in the construction industry. One way of understanding why the site managers overworked is because their work provided an indispensable coupling mechanism for maintaining the loosely

coupled system in construction. A coupling lens on overwork thus offers an important complement to the symbolic perspective. It highlights a need to account for both symbolic *and* material conditions when examining overwork.

Coupling work seems to both offer an advantage and poses a liability for site managers through the paradoxical effects it produces, but also, and implicitly, for the organization (cf. Weick, 1976). Coupling work ensures that the organization has highly dedicated and independent 'project barons' (Gann et al., 2012) who are willing to prioritize what is best for the project at all times (short-term advantage). However, it also becomes difficult to achieve any form of standardization between these project baronies with all their seemingly 'unique' solutions and coupling procedures. This can be seen as a long-term liability as standardization has been highlighted as a central means of increasing the productivity in construction organizations (e.g., Egan, 1998; Josephson and Saukkoriipi, 2006). These findings align with Weick's (1976, p. 7) idea that loosely coupled systems tend to preserve the 'uniqueness, identity and separateness' of their elements, which militates against standardization. Orton and Weick (1990) further elaborated this idea by arguing that loosely coupled systems are less conducive to systemwide change than tightly coupled systems.

The findings suggest that there exists a recursive relationship between the practice of coupling work and the coupling conditions of the construction industry. This recursiveness seems to be predicated upon a mutual reinforcement where the condition of loose coupling has come to shape the work and identities of site managers, and how these managers enact their work to preserve this condition. This is a critical insight since it suggests that coupling work might implicate a preserving mechanism for the loosely coupled construction system that function as a 'buffer' against external organizational control and change initiatives (cf. Orton and Weick, 1990). It is possible that learning across project boundaries might be constrained by this preserving mechanism (cf. Styhre et al., 2004). Paper III outlines how site managers can be reluctant to share important knowledge of project operations with their colleagues. Protecting this knowledge is an important means to preserve the 'uniqueness' of their projects and, in extension, to safeguard their autonomy.

Another important contribution of coupling work is that it turns attention to the contested and political nature of managerial work (e.g., Jackall, 1988; Watson, 1994), especially how mundane coordination work is linked to issues of power, resistance and identity. To my knowledge, this is an unexplored avenue in research on managerial work and coordination. This is also a perspective that adds value to the emerging literature on coordination in construction. Studies that have examined coordination most often neglect issues of resistance and contestation. In fact, one could even go further and argue that coordination is treated as an 'apolitical' phenomenon in the sense that researchers tend to emphasize aspects such as shared understanding, trust, mutual adaptation and collaboration (e.g., Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Hossain, 2009; Kadefors, 2004; Bygballe et al., 2016). Aspects such as competing interests, distrust, territorial protection and manipulation are addressed to a lesser extent and are arguably often seen as obstacles to be *overcome* by better collaboration and coordination. Coupling work contributes to this perspective by showing that coordination and resistance are not mutually exclusive from each other. In contrast, it is shown that they can operate in tandem, and often in complex and subtle ways. This is a notable contribution that warrants further research.

Coupling work is a concept that highlights a need to integrate both loose and tight in order to disentangle interdependencies in loosely coupled systems, especially implicit interdependencies that implicate power relations and resource exploitation. This aligns with Orton and Weick's (1990) call for organization scholars to engage with the particularities of the coupling pattern – loose *and* tight – in order to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms and observed outcomes of a loosely coupled system. In the theoretical section, I claim that much previous research in construction has focused on the loose layer of the coupling system at the macro-level of the industry, especially how loose couplings among actors foster a short-term mentality which hampers innovation, learning and change. The present study has offered an important complement by focusing on the under-researched tight layer of the system.

The findings suggest that understanding the actual (practical) underpinning of the *whole* system is critical to achieving changes within the system, such as standardization, digitalization and improved sustainability. A number of studies have proposed that the industry would benefit from reconfiguring its coupling pattern in order to achieve long-term changes and to improve its performance (e.g., Dorée and Holmen, 2004; Bygballe et al., 2010; Crespin-Mazet et al., 2015). An often-proposed solution is that actors in the permanent industry network ought to collaborate and tighten their coupling to the construction projects, for example through partnering or supply chain integration (e.g., Bygballe et al., 2010). This would potentially entail that considerable authority and control would be transferred from the project baronies to the level of the permanent organization and network.

However, these studies have not taken into account the preserving mechanism that is embedded in day-to-day coupling work on construction sites. This is understandable given that the tight layer of the coupling system has very rarely been in focus. Coupling work is a practice that poses a considerable risk of undermining intended change initiatives in the construction industry. An implication of this insight is that both scholars and practitioners increasingly need to consider the situated lived realities of site managers, in their role as coupling workers, as regards all kinds of change initiatives that ultimately threaten their 'loosely coupled' way of working. This does not by any means entail to uniformly favor the perspective and preferences of these managers. However, it does entail that lived realities must be taken into consideration, and that actual or potential resistance cannot be ignored. Otherwise, the efforts expended on a reconfiguration of the coupling pattern may well be wasted.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the work of construction site managers, focusing in particular on how they experience and cope with their work. The aim of the thesis was to explore the everyday work of site managers in order to critically investigate the idea that managerial work practices are causally derived from macro-level characteristics as most construction management scholars maintain. In order to fulfil the aim, the thesis has drawn on rich empirical data gathered in a large construction company (ConstructED), combining interviews, observations and workshops, as well as interview data from several other large and mid-sized construction companies in Sweden. Throughout the research process, three interrelated phenomena have emerged from the in-depth exploration of the everyday work practice of site managers. I have chosen to present these as 'steps' as they highlight an increasing complexity and paradoxicality underlying the work of these managers. These are as follows: (1) overwork as an ambiguous manifestation of coping and normalization, (2) autonomy as a source for entrapment in the seeming absence of control, and (3) coupling work as a practice of tightly coupling site activities and coupling oneself tightly to the site. In this chapter, I will summarize the research. I will then highlight the main contributions of the thesis. This is followed by a reflection of limitations and call for future research.

6.1 Summary of the research

The findings have revealed a paradoxical tension between autonomy and overwork that goes to the heart of the contradictory, Janus-faced image of site managers, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis. This is an image of a manager that is powerful and influential, and powerless and constrained at the same time. The study confirms that site managers tend to cope with their demanding work situation by working excessively long hours. However, while overwork has often been portrayed as a one-directional outcome of pressures derived from industry conditions, this study shows that it is a much more complex, multifaceted and meaningful phenomenon than has hitherto been taken into consideration. Overwork can be understood both as a symbolic manifestation of how the managers reactively cope with a constraining work situation *and* how they proactively mobilize (and normalize) this image of themselves to expand their influence and autonomy. For many site mangers, being overworked is thus not seen as entirely negative since it also can be rewarding, at least symbolically in terms of self-image, for them.

Yet, the findings further reveal an additional layer of complexity added to this image. It is shown that site managers' proclivity to increase their autonomy through overwork can trigger unintended dynamics through which they entrap themselves and feel that they are unable to escape their self-chosen way of working. An explanation for this entrapment, I suggest, lies in how overwork gradually serves to erode the managers non-working lives, which has the effect that their lives and identities increasingly come to revolve around work. In this sense, they might retain, or even increase their autonomy *at* work, but their autonomy *from* work is curtailed. Rather than using their autonomy to change their way of working, it is shown that the

managers use it to justify a lifestyle that revolves around work. What is especially intriguing with this entrapment pattern is that it unfolds in an industry that researchers often refer to as lacking an effective control apparatus to influence site personnel. This phenomenon highlights the contours of an unobtrusive, yet strong, control mechanism that potentially might serve to control and discipline the site managers indirectly. Whether this control mechanism is exploited by construction organizations, and how effective this exploitation might be, is something for future studies to examine.

It is further shown that these complex and tension-ridden processes do not unfold in a contextual vacuum. The concept of 'coupling work' is introduced to examine how the work practice of site managers links to the loosely coupled structure of the construction industry. This linkage seems to be predicated upon a mutual reinforcement where the condition of loose coupling has come to shape the work of site managers, and how the managers recursively enact their work to preserve this condition. It is shown that a very specific kind of coupling work is enacted by site managers to seemingly purposefully enhance their indispensability in construction projects. This coupling work maintains the condition of organizational loose coupling at the same time as it allows the site managers to safeguard their autonomy by tightening site activities and practices to themselves, and consequently away from the parent organization. An indirect, and maybe unanticipated effect, however, is that pressure is increased on site managers as coordination pertaining to the project comes to revolve more and more around them as persons. Their constant presence, availability and long working hours are thus essential in order to keep building activities tightly coupled. In this sense, overwork might be seen as an integral and normal feature of coupling work.

6.2 Contributions

This thesis offers a number of interesting and worthy practical and theoretical contributions. Here, I have chosen to present them chronologically as they are highlighted in the discussion.

First, the thesis offers an important empirical contribution to research on the work of construction site managers. Although it is widely recognized that site managers have a vital role in the construction industry, there has been a lack of detailed knowledge of what characterizes their day-to-day work practice. This thesis provides a rich and vivid description of what work means to site managers in terms of symbolic ideals, affects and virtues, and crafting of their identities. It highlights a strong positive identification with a certain ideal, or a way of life, that revolves around a proclivity towards free and autonomous work. Moreover, it is shown that site managers enact an ongoing resistance to organizational standardization initiatives that ultimately threaten their autonomous work lives. This re-enforces the importance for both researchers and practitioners to seriously take into account the lived realities and identities of the site managers when introducing 'new' ways of working and organizing in construction projects.

Second, the thesis contributes to research on work-life balance and overwork in construction management (CM) but also in extension to management and organization studies (MOS) by showing that overwork is a complex, multifaceted and meaningful behavior. Although similar ideas have been touched upon in MOS, this thesis aligns with additional

research emphasizing the contextualized nature of the meanings of overwork. Of special relevance is the contribution of the three narratives (*advancement, preservation* and *entrapment*) through which site managers justify excessive overwork. These narratives show that far from all site managers are driven by a desire for promotion and career advancement – a widespread ideal in many professional service occupations where much research on overwork has been conducted. Instead, it is shown that many site managers are driven by an ideal of autonomy, by which they seek to distance themselves from the parent organization. This contribution shows that researchers need to be, not only sensitive to the contextualized meanings of overwork, but also to broaden the contextual scope to explore the multiplicity of meanings and ideals that pervade different occupational contexts. This study shows that the underexplored context of construction can provide a rich and fertile empirical site for challenging and expanding social-science theorizing on overwork. However, additional research is also needed beyond masculine, male-dominated contexts. For example, it would be valuable to compare male-dominated workplaces, such as construction and consulting, with female dominated ones, such as nursing and teaching, where overwork also is prevalent but may be driven by entirely different meanings and ideals.

Third, the thesis highlights the notions of indispensability as an essential factor in understanding the paradoxical interplay between autonomy and overwork. Although this is something that has been addressed in previous research, this thesis shows that indispensability is a phenomenon that might take different forms and have different meanings. I have shown that the notion of indispensability needs to be problematized and further elaborated upon. Of particular relevance is the analytical distinction between practical indispensability and symbolic indispensability. The findings in this thesis have shown that it is difficult to conflate these categories, although they are not necessarily mutually exclusive from one another. This categorization might be useful for researchers who are interested in examining the relationship between seductive ideals associated with indispensability (e.g., feeling special, unique and chosen) vis-à-vis practical conditions that can make an individual next to irreplaceable in an organization. It might be even more useful to examine how certain employees (un/successfully) strive to increase their indispensability in organizations, for example by fostering and displaying a symbolic image of oneself as being seen as unique and special, or by appropriating vital knowledge of organizational operations to make oneself practically irreplaceable.

Fourth, the thesis contributes to research on autonomy and control in CM by proposing the existence of an unobtrusive control mechanism underpinning the work of site managers. The study does not provide a definitive answer to whether the site managers were in fact intentionally controlled by the organization. But this is perhaps not the most relevant question. The study indicates that the site managers started to behave *as if* they were controlled. And more importantly, this behavior seemed to be made possible by autonomy and the rewarding nature of their job. This insight highlights a paradoxical interplay between autonomy and control where these opposite poles seem to 'impose on and begin to define each other' (Putnam et al., 2014, p. 428). In MOS, this is not an entirely new insight. The interesting aspect with construction, however, is the widespread assumption among researchers that the industry lacks an effective control apparatus to influence site personnel. Debates have thus tended to take the form of 'either-or', i.e., construction work is seen as *essentially* autonomous, or *essentially* controlled. This thesis highlights a need to go beyond such static perceptions, and instead start

to disentangle the tensions, contradictions and paradoxes underpinning construction work that blur the boundary between autonomy and control. How can increased autonomy lead to increased control? Why do people willingly, even enthusiastically, engage in processes that lead to their entrapment? And what do they get out from this behavior? These questions are evidently of great importance for people working in the industry but have largely been overlooked in construction management research (CMR). The present study has contributed with an initial exploration of these issues, but there is a need for more critical management-oriented work in construction to reveal the 'coercive' effects of non-coercive controls.

Fifth, an important theoretical contribution is the concept of 'coupling work'. This is a concept that contributes to expand Dubois and Gadde's (2002) coupling theory by showing that the reproduction of the coupling conditions in the industry is recursively linked to the mundane reproduction of work on construction sites. This is a linkage that has not previously been captured in macro-level conceptualizations of the coupling system but could be discerned when exploring the micro-level work activities of site managers through a practice lens. Coupling work is thus a contribution that highlights the value of theorizing from micro-level practices of managerial work. Whereas most previous research has focused on the loose characteristics of the coupling system at the industry macro-level, coupling work highlights a need for researchers to examine both the loose and the tight in relation to each other. Moreover, the concept also highlights a need for integrating *work* as a crucial analytical focal point when examining macro-structural characteristics and modes of organizing in construction, such as loose coupling. A crucial argument is that the reproduction of the loose and tight layers of the coupling system are mutually constitutive of each other precisely through their entanglement with work. Consequently, by omitting work in the analysis, it is likely that scholars will only get a fragmented understanding of how the coupling conditions of the industry are reproduced, and how they can be altered. This finding has strong relevance for the emerging literature on change and development in CM, especially for studies that propose that the industry should reconfigure its coupling patterns to improve its performance.

Sixth, the concept of coupling work adds value to management theory and research on managerial work beyond construction as well. It shows that the practice of coupling can be understood as a form of coordination work performed by managers. However, it is also shown that the concept cannot easily be reduced to coordination since it also fills an additional function of resistance. In this sense, I argue that coupling work is distinguished from managerial coordination work and ought to be studied as such. This has shown that site managers enact a specific kind of coupling work that connects to particular contingencies in the construction industry. It might be difficult to generalize from these particularities to other roles and industries. It would therefore be valuable to examine if there exist other forms, or hybrids, of coupling work in additional contexts. For example, what would coupling work look like in tightly coupled organizational settings, such as nuclear power plants? Are there other actors enacting coupling work beside managers? What are the potential measures to counter-resist coupling work? Are there additional functions beside resistance enacted through coupling work in other contexts? These are questions that call for further research in different organizational contexts.

6.3 Implications for practice

The thesis offers some advice for practitioners that seek to alleviate site managers' pressured work situation and to foster more sustainable forms of working and living in the construction industry. The findings suggest that any attempt to attenuate the normalized overwork pattern would benefit from taking a holistic and dynamic approach in doing so. For example, many of the conditions that fuel overwork seem to operate dynamically across multiple levels (individual, organizational, industry) and therefore makes it difficult to deal with this issue on one level alone. Some suggestions for senior managers and HR personnel are therefore to be sensitive to the dynamic and contradictory nature of the forces that drive overwork. For example, this study suggests that merely offering organizational support might be a blunt tool to alleviate overwork. Relatively few site managers seem prone to accept such 'offering' since it interferes with the image of themselves as being autonomous and self-reliant. This, of course, does not mean that they do not need help, or that they do not silently desire that some of the pressure would be alleviated. Instead, a better approach might be to design effective support functions that do not erase the site managers' self-image. For example, most site managers in this study expressed a desire to reduce administrative duties since they felt that this stood in the way of them performing other tasks satisfyingly. A suggestion is therefore to increase administrative staff and other administrative support functions, not as an offer, but as a *standard* in construction projects. Unlike many other standardization initiatives, this is one that site managers would likely be inclined to accept, and even embrace. It would alleviate some of their pressure at the same time as it preserves their self-image as being autonomous.

I also see a value of implementing in-house workshops of the kind carried out in this research project, in which site managers and others work with their own 'real' cases. A major problem for many construction organizations is the (physical and mental) distance between the line organization and the construction sites. There is often a lack of natural arenas where site managers and senior managers can communicate open-endedly and verbalize issues that lie close to their heart. An understandable consequence for many site managers is therefore a lack of felt belongingness with the firm and reinforced identification with the site. My impression was that in-hours workshops offered a rare opportunity to bridge this divide. They allowed the participants to create a mutual understanding of the challenges they face, and what aspects of work they perceive as important and desirable, seen from their different perspectives. The workshops also allowed the site managers to de-normalize overwork; when voicing their concerns in public, the managers realized that their 'self-chosen' problem of overwork was in fact a collective problem. Hearing other persons talk about dysfunctional life situations caused by overwork made the managers aware of that their own situations were not unique. This also made the managers aware of how strange and harmful their own behavior was. I therefore believe that workshops can provide a valuable tool for organizational members to work together across multiple levels to improve the work situation for construction managers.

6.4 Limitations and call for future research

This thesis has provided valuable insights into the everyday work of construction site managers. Through an in-depth exploration of their work, the thesis has furthermore provided valuable insight into a range of important issues that are otherwise often overlooked in CMR. A simultaneous strength and limitation of this study has been its focus on the construction site level. Construction is a highly decentralized and project-based industry, and its loosely coupled features span across multiple levels (site, project, organization, industry). The micro (site) perspective adopted in this thesis has provided valuable insight into how macro (industry) conditions influence the work of site managers. However, it has been more difficult to discern the wider implications of site managers' work on the industry level. This might be seen as a limitation of the study since this is partly what I set out to do (see RQ 2). For example, was the implication of site managers' enactment of coupling work industry-level loose coupling, or was it mainly organization-level loose coupling? Of course, it is possible to argue that organizational loose coupling *is* an important part of industry loose coupling, in line with Dubois and Gadde's (2002) argument that industry loose coupling is made possible by decentralization of *organizational* authority. Nonetheless, the predominant focus on the micro level prevents further insight into the effects on the industry macro-level. For example, does coupling work create a distance to other stakeholders involved in the projects beside the parent organization? Does it prevent other stakeholders to tighten the coupling to the projects, for instance through partnering or supply chain integration? Are there any long-term effects of coupling work on the permanent industry network beyond the temporary networks of the individual projects? Answers to these questions remain uncertain and call for further investigation.

In the introduction, I argued for a need to shift focus and give the micro perspective interpretative precedence when exploring practices of managerial work. After writing this thesis, I would suggest that there is a need for future research to re-integrate the micro and macro perspectives. It would be valuable to a combine a practice lens, such as structuration theory, with an industry network perspective to gain better insight into the recursive interplay between practices of managerial work and structural conditions on industry level. Such an approach would require including industry network data beyond the construction site level as well. It should be mentioned that a large body of research already *has* applied a network perspective, such as the Industrial Network Approach (INA), to examine relationships and structural features of the construction industry. However, this research seldom engages with people and practices of everyday work on construction sites. A practice perspective could add value to the network perspective by linking macro and meso-level phenomena in the industry to situated realities of everyday work on the micro-level. A network perspective could also add value to the practice perspective by bridging micro-level practices to occurrences and phenomena at the meso and macro-levels.

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